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A new season, a new start. Feels like it comes around quicker every year, doesn't it?

After an unusually busy summer of club football, it feels good to be back on the familiar firm ground of a regular European season – even if league organisers in Spain and Italy enjoyed playing abroad so much that they want to do it again (more on pages 28 and 43).

As always, we've called upon our network of correspondents to provide the lowdown across the continent for 2025-26, as well as taken a look back at England's historic Euro 2025 win.

Jamie Evans, Managing Editor

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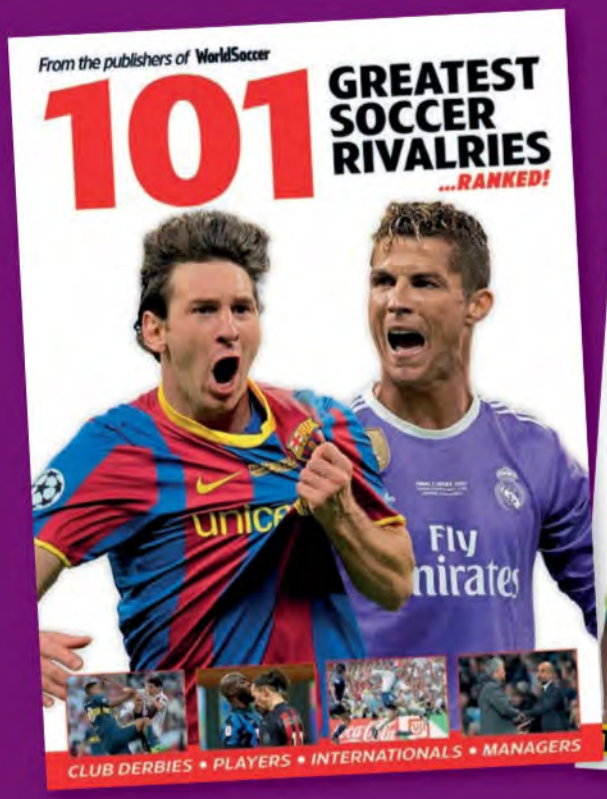

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Henry WINTER
THE VOICE OF FOOTBALL

The price of everything: should all players have a release clause?

Most-coveted centre-forward in the summer transfer window ...Alexander Isak

The Premier League is an incredibly sophisticated business, but it needs to get up to speed with the need for release or buy-out clauses in players' contracts. In La Liga, such clauses are mandatory under Spanish employment laws and prevent sagas such as the Alexander Isak story that dominated the pre-season narrative in England.

For Liverpool, Isak was the most-coveted centre-forward in the summer 2025 transfer window. For Newcastle, Isak was a rebel without a clause.

There has, so far, been little desire for such clauses in English football. Pity. They would simplify and speed up the often wearisome protracted transfer. They would prevent low-ball offers. Basically, stump up or stomp off.

A cynic would suggest that the unwillingness to embrace more clauses is because transfer sagas all add more unpredictable and lengthy new storylines to the Premier League soap opera. The Isak saga almost became a cottage industry. The media loved it. They gorged on the briefings. They had back-pages adorned with changing headlines: "Isak stays", "Isak goes", "Geordie Joy", "Geordie Despair", "Fog on the Tyne" and "*Auf Wiedersehen* Pest". Readers devoured it.

Columns were filled, rolling news raced across the bottom of screens, phone-ins steamed with angry callers and studios teemed with pundits pontificating. Social media unrolled threads the length of the Bayeux Tapestry. Much of the Premier League is all about "The Show", the intrigue, especially around the money and players' fees and wages, as well as the compelling drama on the pitch.

Agents of Premier League-based players would largely resist clauses that streamline deal-making. The more complicated the negotiations, the more involved the agent is.

The clauses differ slightly. "Release clauses" simply serve to trigger talks, allowing the player to have conversations with a suitor. They are liked by players who don't see their current club as their final destination and particularly want an achievable fee to facilitate a move; negotiations for the original deal will factor this in.

"Buy-out clauses", more prevalent in Spain, see a figure that the player

must meet in buying out his contract. The Spanish have this wonderful system where the player effectively pays his buy-out fee to La Liga, conjuring up the image of sought-after stars pushing wheelbarrows full of euros into the league's offices off Avenida de America in Madrid. Obviously, the buying club transfers it to the player first.

Such clauses make the transfer system more grown-up and transparent. They lessen the need for tapping up. They promote sound business practice. Look at the situation in England where buying clubs push for transfers where they pay in instalments. That may help their immediate position, deferring payment, but encourages some live-for-now overspending.

Manchester United negotiated with Brentford over Bryan Mbeumo, eventually agreeing on a £65 million fee, plus £6m in add-ons, for the attacker. United persuaded Brentford to accept payment in four instalments. That makes good, short-term PSR sense but does rather postpone problems. United's most recent quarterly accounts revealed they owed £175.5m in remaining transfer payments before March 31, 2026. A day of reckoning is coming.

There are exceptions. United did a deal with Wolves to spread the £62.5m cost for Matheus Cunha's release clause in three instalments over two years.

Clubs can offer above the clause too, as Arsenal did to Real Sociedad to sign Martin Zubimendi. The silky Spain midfielder's buy-out clause was £51m. With *La Real's* willing agreement, Arsenal paid £60m so they could spread the payment.

There has, so far, been little desire for such clauses in English football. Pity. They would simplify and speed up the often wearisome protracted transfer

Some of the need for buy-out clauses has been accelerated by the financial might of Saudi Pro League clubs or clubs funded by wealthy Arab states. Barcelona thought they were unlikely to lose Neymar given his €222m buy-out clause. But Qatari-backed PSG paid it in 2017. That sent clauses hurtling upwards. Vinicius Junior, Kylian Mbappe, Jude Bellingham and Trent Alexander-Arnold all have €1bn exit clauses at Real Madrid. Pedri and Lamine Yamal have similar at Barca. That would ward off the vultures but, in reality, negotiations would still take place for much lower. Most clauses are set at more reasonable rates.

Release clauses can change. Nico Williams' exit fee was €58m when Barcelona tried to sign him earlier this summer. The winger's agent must have been delighted. He was in a win-win situation. Either his client moved to Barcelona or, as transpired, Athletic responded, awarding Williams a new, improved ten-year contract with the exit fee increased to €90m.

If that is beyond Barca's means, given their financial issues, it certainly wouldn't dissuade Premier League clubs next summer, especially if Williams enjoys a good World Cup. It would certainly be a quick transfer, far faster than the slow-moving Premier League system.

• **Ask Henry:** Submit your questions to Henry Winter by subscribing to our newsletter at *worldsoccer.com*

Wallsend boys to men

When Alan Shearer played for Wallsend Boys Club he was the first one there for training and games, even though he lived a distance away in Gosforth. Others quickly followed. Shearer embodied the discipline and dedication pervading Wallsend.

It's no surprise that Wallsend have five old boys who went on to represent England: Peter Beardsley, Michael Carrick, Alan Thompson and Fraser Forster as well as Shearer. Elliot Anderson, Nottingham Forest's tactically disciplined, ball-playing 22-year-old midfielder from Whitley Bay, should be next.

English football grows from such grass-roots clubs as Wallsend. The FA must ensure they are properly nurtured with the right financial support.

Wallsend Boys Club alumnus... Elliot Anderson

Young by name

Still going strong ...Ashley Young

It shows Ashley Young's longevity as a player that one of the players he made his Watford debut with, Alec Chamberlain, is now 61. Young is still playing at 40, 22 years after that first game. After 90 exhausting minutes for his latest club, Ipswich Town, against Bromley in the Carabao Cup, Young drove in an unstoppable penalty in the shootout. Ipswich went on to lose the shootout, but know they have a veteran full-back with a winner's mentality, a role model with a ferocious work-out and work ethic, and a love of ice baths, still going strong having just passed 750 games.

Keir RADNEDGE

THE INSIDER

The Independent Football Regulator

A new era for English football, or another set of ineffective rules?

Fan protests...the European Super League prompted a government review of football governance

In 1862 when John Charles Thring, a clergyman and master at Uppingham public school, was attempting to codify association football, he came up with a label: The Simplest Game. Deceptively simple. He proposed ten Rules of Foot-ball; now we have 17 Laws of Football, hedged about with a plethora of modifications, guidelines and protocols. Beyond all that lurks a forest of rules and regulations that have turned the game into a playground for lawyers and accountants, never mind agents.

Ideally, the game should boast governing bodies focused on the purity of football but that ship sailed a long time ago.

Consider the International Football Association Board (IFAB) with its constant meddling; it did not even wait for the annual meeting to jump in earlier this year with a stricture about a double-kick penalty. Ideally, IFAB should undertake a review once every four years and allow its adjustments to work or fail. But that would doubtless cost a lot of men and women their hallowed places on its various sub-committees and advisory bodies.

The old concept of enabling footballers of extraordinary talent (or none) to play and earn whatever rewards they may in money and/or personal enjoyment has been largely forgotten.

So when did the modern mania for regulating every kick of the game take hold? Can any individual or clique be held to account in a game whose upper echelons have been taken prisoner by the entertainment industry, fawning at the feet of corporations that facilitate the golden chains of television and sponsorship zillions? Consider, if you may, how the expanded Club World Cup revealed even the FIFA president (Gianni Infantino currently but it could be anyone) as little more than a puppet in a much bigger show.

Admittedly, it is the populist wonder of The Simplest Game that probably made such developments

inevitable in this modern world. Sport in general and football in particular are hybrids, simultaneously recreation, entertainment and business.

View the latest statistics at the pinnacle of professional sport. Top of the table comes Kroenke Sports & Entertainment, valued at $18.4 billion generated by its ownership of not only football's Arsenal and Colorado Rapids but, more significantly, Los Angeles Rams in the NFL, Denver Nuggets in the NBA and Colorado Avalanche in the NHL. Next up comes Fenway Sports Group ($13.1 bn) via Liverpool, Boston Red Sox of the MLB and Pittsburgh Penguins of the NHL.

On limbs of their own are state-linked entities such as The Abu Dhabi United Group for Development and Investment, which owns 81 per cent of the City Football Group, as well as other multi-club ownership outfits such as John Textor's Eagle Football, Red Bull, Grupo Pachuca and, previously, the notorious 777 Partners.

Of course regulation is essential, but to what degree and with effective or false teeth?

This brings us to English football's controversial Independent Football Regulator (IFR), created by Act of Parliament yet only for England and, specifically, the top five tiers of the men's professional game. Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales are all excluded from its provisions.

Football's current regulatory model may be considered to have developed from UEFA's financial fair play. That was the brainchild of then-president Michel Platini, worried about the solvency or insolvency of clubs entering the European club competitions. As he put it, back in the day: "I see Mr Abramovich spending all this money with Chelsea. But what happens if, one morning, he wakes up and decides to spend his money instead on new yachts or villas? What happens to Chelsea then? We have to protect the game."

Hence FFP, a concept swiftly adopted across most of western Europe's domestic competitions including the Premier League, albeit with local variations. These include the legally proper "fairness" consideration of club finances over a three-year cycle.

Alongside this came the owners' and directors' test (also known as the "fit and proper person test") to deter unsavoury individuals who might indulge in asset stripping (notably of club stadia). But a loophole exists for every law as the Sheffield Wednesday case has revealed. The rules offer no solution when an owner loses interest in his club, for personal or pecuniary reasons.

> Of course regulation is essential, but to what degree and with effective or false teeth?

Neither of these has proved sufficient to quell fears of fans, admittedly late in the day, that the game has been stolen from them.

Change...Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer campaigned for an Independent Football Regulator in last year's general election

In 2021, the fiasco surrounding the swiftly-aborted creation of the European Super League plus the near-simultaneous collapse of Bury prompted a government review of football governance, led by Tracey Crouch MP. July saw the enactment of the Football Governance Act.

The intention is that a licensing system will improve financial sustainability and protect clubs, their traditions and fan involvement with sharper governance and oversight. What it cannot do is stray into areas that may affect English football's commercial success or sporting competitiveness. The latter, in particular, was a sphere in which FIFA and UEFA had particular concern because of their statutes barring government interference in a national association's governance regime.

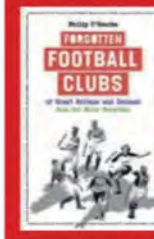
In the hot seat as chair of the IFR will be David Kogan, a former media executive, sometime political historian and Tottenham Hotspur fan. His background in the complex world of sports media rights suggests one of his priorities should usefully be resolving the bitter argument over redistribution of Premier League solidarity payments down the league.

Critics have described the regulator as an unnecessary extra layer of bureaucracy in an already over-regulated game. Quite a contrast to the genesis of the Premier League (and enforced reinvention of the Football League) at the start of the 1990s. Those were the high days of Thatcherite free-market fancy when regulation was a sin.

Now all over the game – from FIFA and UEFA down to domestic league football – the stable doors are being bolted but the horses will take some catching. The game is where it wanted to be back then, for better or worse.

The Rev. John Charles Thring would marvel at what has happened to his Simplest Game. The football itself he would doubtless admire. As for the rest...

BOOKS THIS MONTH



FORGOTTEN FOOTBALL CLUBS
By Philip O'Rourke
(Pitch Publishing, £19.99)

Forgotten Football Clubs of Great Britain and Ireland is a nostalgic journey through the histories of clubs that left an indelible mark on the sport, yet no longer exist. This book turns the spotlight on 50 defunct teams from around England, the Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland – such as Druids, Wanderers, Renton and Corinthians – uncovering their rich and varied stories.

JOURNEY INTO THE UNKNOWN
By Neil Fredrik Jensen
(Pitch Publishing, £14.99)

Journey into the Unknown explores the early years and development of pan-European football competition alongside a changing British attitude to overseas teams. It charts how European club competition became an exciting spectacle, introducing audiences to crack eastern Europeans, skilful Latins and ultra-efficient Germans.

Jonathan WILSON

TECHNICALLY SPEAKING

It takes two

Why appointing joint-managers is on the rise – and why it's failed in the past

In June, Platense beat Huracan to win the Argentinian Apertura, a remarkable achievement for a club that had never won a senior trophy in their previous 120 years of existence. But it was a notable achievement also because Platense were led by a managerial duo – and even in the modern game, in which most major clubs have multiple layers of sporting director, the orthodoxy says that the best form of governance for a football team is one clear leader, an uncomplicated chain of command, a benign (ish) dictatorship.

Sergio Gomez, who turned 44 in July, had a largely unremarkable career in the lower reaches of the Argentinian professional game. Favio Orsi, seven years his senior, was a midfielder of no greater distinction who ended up playing for FC Jazz in Finland. They met in 2012 at Fenix, a club from Buenos Aires, who had just been promoted back to the regionalised third tier of Argentinian football, when both were working as assistants to Oscar Santangelo. When Santangelo resigned in April 2013, the pair were appointed co-managers.

Joint managers ...Favio Orsi and Sergio Gomez on the touchline for Platense

There was surprise, but it worked. They got on well, had complementary skills, and have been a pair ever since. Platense were the ninth side they have managed together, enjoying modest success: before last season, their most notable achievement was taking Flandria to the Primera B Metropolitana title in 2016.

The pair quit Platense shortly after winning the league title, citing "personal reasons", but seemingly feeling that they had taken the team as far as they could and that it was better to leave on a high.

Why, though, is their success so eye-catching? Why has it historically been so unusual for managers to work as a two? And could the concept be on the rise, with Viking FK leading the Norwegian Eliteserien under Bjarte Lunde Aarsheim and Morten Jensen?

> Why is Orsi and Gomez's success so eye-catching? Why has it historically been so unusual for managers to work as a two? And could the concept be on the rise?

From an English point of view, two examples of joint-managers stand out: Roy Evans and Gerard Houllier at Liverpool, and Steve Gritt and Alan Curbishley at Charlton Athletic.

The former example essentially functioned as a transitional period between the two managers. Evans followed the tumultuous reign of Graeme Souness with a brief to restore the Boot Room traditions. But although Liverpool played attractive football they never came close to repeating the successes of the 1970s and '80s, while tales of ill discipline were rife.

Houllier had won the league with Paris Saint-Germain – before they were anything like the club they are now – and was widely respected for his work in French youth development. When he was appointed in the summer of 1998, it was widely assumed he would replace long-serving assistant coach Ronnie Moran, who had just retired. But he was installed as joint-manager, despite obvious differences of approach and temperament. By November, Evans decided he had had enough and resigned, leaving Houllier to win a UEFA Cup, an FA Cup and two League Cups.

Power struggle ...Roy Evans and Gerard Houllier didn't work as joint-managers of Liverpool

Gritt and Curbishley's situation was slightly different in that both were still players when Charlton appointed them in 1991, albeit Curbishley was already a player-coach and took on more of a managerial role. Both brought their playing careers to a formal close in 1993, having overseen Charlton's return to the Valley, and they survived two more years before the club decided they would prefer a single leader. Gritt was ousted and went on to a journeyman career, although he did oversee Brighton's remarkable survival in 1997. Curbishley, meanwhile, spent a total of 16 years at Charlton, taking them into the Premier League.

There are other examples. Although John Sillett is better known than George Curtis, the duo were technically joint-managers as they led Coventry City to survival in 1985-86 and the FA Cup a year later. Colin Todd and Roy McFarland at Bolton Wanderers and Keith Stevens and Alan McLeary at Millwall fared rather less successfully.

Then there were the odd fudges, such as Doug Livermore and Ray Clemence as joint head coaches at Tottenham under the chief executive Terry Venables in 1992, or Venables being brought in at Middlesbrough alongside Bryan Robson in 2000. In both cases, it was obvious Venables had been the man in charge, just as Matt Busby had remained the obvious boss at Manchester United after retiring in 1969 to be "general manager" with Wilf McGuinness as head coach.

And yet, there are clear examples of managers and assistants who function essentially as a pairing. Brian Clough was always at his best alongside Peter Taylor, while Bob Paisley was very obviously more than a trainer for Bill Shankly. In both those cases, an astute and quiet tactician worked in the background while a charismatic showman worked, as Clough put it, "front of shop".

The issue, perhaps, is one of terminology. All managers these days work as part of a team, alongside technical directors and coaches. What matters is less what each individual role is called, than whether there is a clear division of roles – and if two people have essentially the same title, it's easy to see how that can become confused.

Lennon MILLER

(Udinese)

The list of Scottish players to move to Serie A has another name to be added after Miller, who became Motherwell's youngest-ever player within a week of turning 16 in 2022, joined Udinese for a reported £4.75 million.

He is in good company. Lewis Ferguson was named the best midfielder in Italy after his displays for Bologna in 2023-24, and Billy Gilmour and Scott McTominay both won the *Scudetto* at Napoli last season, with the latter's stunning performances earning him a Ballon d'Or nomination. In June, Miller played his first senior Scotland matches alongside that trio as well as Sassuolo left-back Josh Doig and Torino striker Che Adams.

Miller's new club, who first tried to sign him in January, described him as "a modern midfielder, capable of combining technique, vision and character."

Dastan SATPAYEV

(Kairat)

The teenager, who will join Chelsea next year, scored three goals in qualifying, including a crucial stoppage-time penalty, to help Kairat reach the Champions League play-offs.

Aleksey BATRAKOV

(Lokomotiv Moscow)

Scouts are tuning in to watch the 20-year-old attacking midfielder after he scored six times in three games, following a breakout 2024-25 campaign in which he had a hand in 21 goals. Already has two goals in five games for Russia.

Kyle HUDLIN

(Thep Xanh Nam Dinh)

Widely described as the world's tallest footballer, the 6ft 9in striker made a surprise move to Vietnam after leaving Huddersfield Town. Unsurprisingly, he scored with a header in his first game, in the Vietnamese Super Cup.

Will WRIGHT

(Liverpool)

Liverpool reportedly saw off competition from Arsenal to sign the 17-year-old striker for £200,000 from Salford City. Wright played twice in League Two last season, and has joined the Reds' academy squad.

Jim HOLDEN

AT THE HEART OF THE GAME

In the firing line

The pressure will dial up on international managers as the World Cup inches closer

Every defeat is a crisis for the manager of a major international football nation, and particularly so during a season leading up to the World Cup finals. Luciano Spalletti knows this only too well, sacked as head coach of Italy after a 3-0 loss away to Norway in their opening qualifying game.

He was the first victim, but will not be alone in his fate. The demise of Spalletti was quickly followed by the exit of Poland manager Michal Probierz, who quit after a defeat to Finland and the declaration of star striker Robert Lewandowski that he wouldn't play while Probierz was in charge.

Who else could be in the firing line as we enter the early months of autumn when nations play a series of matches crucial to their hopes of reaching the tournament next summer?

One fixture stands out above all – England away to Serbia. It is a game that Thomas Tuchel cannot afford to lose. It would put direct qualification for the World Cup in jeopardy, and possibly his job as well.

It is a long time since England lost a match like this. They have suffered precisely three World Cup qualifying defeats this century, the last of which was a dead rubber away to Ukraine 16 years ago. Before that, there was the 1-0 defeat to Northern Ireland in September 2005, when qualification was already looking assured. You have to go back to October 2000 for the last time a defeat seriously threatened England's place at a World Cup: the 1-0 loss to Germany that prompted Kevin Keegan to resign within an hour of the final whistle at the old Wembley.

How would the supporters, media and FA officials react now to a similar crisis? How would Tuchel?

Under pressure ...England boss Thomas Tuchel

He came into the job with confidence, openly critical of how the England team had performed previously. The bravado required a blistering start, but instead there were four dismal performances, doubts mounting with each game, and a chorus of boos damning the dire 3-1 home defeat to Senegal.

Tuchel's troubles contrasted with more success for England's youngsters at the European Under-21 Championship, winning the tournament for the second time in succession under the impressive guidance of coach Lee Carsley. Oh, yes, the same Carsley who impressed as interim manager of the senior team before the FA decided to hire a hugely expensive foreign boss.

> England's fixture away to Serbia is a game that Thomas Tuchel cannot afford to lose. It would put direct qualification for the World Cup in jeopardy, and possibly his job as well

Is the intense scrutiny and instant scepticism unfair on Tuchel? No, not at all. He was appointed on a short-term contract with only one aim: to win the World Cup. Any hint of qualification jeopardy would be strong grounds for his removal. Sometimes in football it's better to cut your losses quickly rather than continue with a mistake, not least when there is an obvious and instant alternative at hand in Carsley.

That was the ruthless Italian way when it was clear the players were not responding to the tactics or motivation of Spalletti. No time to waste, and when Claudio Ranieri declined the job they opted for the noisy spirit and inspiration of Gennaro Gattuso to reinvigorate the team and avoid another failure to reach the World Cup finals.

It's a gamble, but changing a manager always is – even for Brazil who have taken on Carlo Ancelotti as head coach, following a similar path to England with an outsider. Ancelotti is a heavyweight choice, no doubt about that, but do serial winners at elite clubs make great international team bosses? Not so often, if truth be told.

Brazil, at least, have already limped to qualification. For many nations these Autumn days will be vital, for example in CONCACAF's third round Group B where three well-known names are in direct and intriguing competition for one guaranteed place at the World Cup.

Steve McClaren, Dwight Yorke and Dick Advocaat will be in charge of Jamaica, Trinidad & Tobago and Curacao respectively, all scheming and plotting for glory. It's likely to be very tight, so expect a few draws – because any defeat could become a crisis.

"I don't think it changes the Premier League's view on this at all, we don't have any plans to play matches abroad. It's not anywhere near my in-tray and it's not a debate around our table"

Premier League chief Richard Masters reacts to news that Italy and Spain are exploring playing top-flight matches abroad

The month in numbers

The facts and stats that have caught our eye in the world of football this month...

20,200
Projected capacity of Bournemouth's Vitality Stadium after a proposed redevelopment is completed ahead of the 2027-28 campaign.

10
Years that Argentina midfielder Leandro Paredes spent away from Boca Juniors before re-joining his former club in July from Roma.

28
Penalties taken in the UEFA Champions League qualifying shootout between Hamrun Spartans of Malta and Lithuanian champions Zalgiris, with the Maltese side eventually prevailing 11-10.

£50m
Reported option-to-buy fee agreed between Everton and Manchester City if the Toffees choose to sign Jack Grealish permanently after the 29-year-old England playmaker arrived on a season-long loan.

24
Minutes that it took Republic of Ireland striker Evan Ferguson to notch a hat-trick on his debut for Roma, who he has joined on a season-long loan from Brighton.

10
Shirt number that both Lamine Yamal and Kylian Mbappe will wear at Barcelona and Real Madrid respectively this season.

Iconic ...Yamal will don the number as worn by Lionel Messi

UEFA Super Cup winners...Paris Saint-Germain

50
Number of European Super Cups that have been played since the game's inception in 1974, with the latest edition won for the first time by Paris Saint-Germain, who beat Tottenham Hotspur on penalties after a 2-2 draw in Udine.

6
Spanish players to have been nominated for the 2025 Women's Ballon d'Or, more than any other country. European champions Arsenal are the best-represented club with seven players on the list.

$1m
Fee paid by MLS outfit LAFC to sign defender Ryan Porteous from Watford. The 26-year-old wasn't the only Scotland centre-back on the move, with Scott McKenna swapping Las Palmas for Dinamo Zagreb and Liam Cooper exiting Bulgarian club CSKA Sofia.

4
Players to have moved between Tottenham Hotspur and Bayern Munich in the last two years after Portugal's Joao Palhinha moved to the North London club on loan. He follows the trend set by Harry Kane, Eric Dier and Mathys Tel.

3
Clubs that Alvaro Morata has played for in 2025 after the Spain striker joined Como on loan from Milan following an unsuccessful spell in Turkey at Galatasaray.

29
Minutes that it took England striker Tammy Abraham to score a hat-trick in a Conference League qualifier for new club Besiktas against St Patrick's Athletic.

Hat-trick hero ...Besiktas' Tammy Abraham

38
Years since a Scottish player was last nominated for the Men's Ballon d'Or award – Ally McCoist in 1987 – before Scott McTominay was named on the 2025 shortlist.

3
Tier of French football that Ajaccio will play in next season after they were relegated from Ligue 2 due to financial issues.

5
Premier League clubs that Aaron Ramsdale has signed for after the 27-year-old England goalkeeper joined Newcastle United on loan from Southampton.

12
Career goals that England striker Callum Wilson has scored against West Ham United, who he joined on a free transfer from Newcastle United in August.

£300m+
Combined transfer fees spent by the three promoted clubs – Leeds United, Sunderland and Burnley – this summer as they look to preserve their Premier League status this season.

30
Goals that Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang scored for Marseille in his first spell at the club – a tally that the Gabon striker will add to after re-joining the French club from Saudi Arabia's Al Qadsiah.

8
Games that Spanish coach Manolo Marquez led India for before his contract was terminated in July with only one win to his name. He was replaced by Khalid Jamil.

10
WAFCON titles won by Nigeria after they beat Morocco in this year's final (more on page 82).

WAFCON champions ...Nigeria

OBITUARIES

Jorge COSTA
(1971-2025)
Jorge Costa played 383 games as the aggressive heart of Porto's defence in the 1990s and early 2000s. The pinnacle of his club career came under Jose Mourinho when he captained the Dragons to an extraordinary run of successes, including the UEFA Cup in 2003 and the Champions League in 2004. Also played 50 times for Portugal between 1992 and 2002. Costa went on to coach Braga, CFR Cluj in Romania and Tunisia's CS Sfaxien among others. The late former Porto club president Jorge Nuno Pinto da Costa called him "a symbol of our club's soul," while Mourinho described him as "the embodiment of leadership."

Sergio CAMPANA
(1934-2025)
A member of the Italian Football Hall of Fame, recognised not only for his career as a centre-forward for hometown club Vicenza and Bologna but for his work in founding the Italian Footballers' Association in 1968.

Julio Cesar CORTES
(1941-2025)
The Uruguay midfielder appeared in the finals of the 1962, 1966 and 1970 World Cups and scored three goals in 30 caps. Won two Uruguayan league titles with Penarol plus the 1966 Copa Libertadores and Intercontinental Cup. His coaching career included two stints with Guatemala, including success in the 2001 Copa Centroamericana.

Uruguay World Cup star...Julio Cesar Cortes

Wyn DAVIES
(1942-2025)
Wales centre-forward, outstanding in the air, who began with Wrexham before making his name at Bolton where his physical style and heading ability earned him the nickname, "Wyn the Leap." Davies later helped Newcastle win the 1969 Inter-Cities Fairs Cup and also played for both Manchester City and United. Scored six goals in 34 games for Wales between 1964 and 1972.

Porto hero...Jorge Costa (L) lifts the Champions League trophy in 2004

John FALLON
(1940-2025)
Goalkeeper Fallon joined Celtic in 1959, eventually replacing Frank Haffey before being replaced himself by veteran Ronnie Simpson before the triumphant 1967 European Cup campaign. Months after the Lisbon success, Fallon was thrown into the maelstrom of the Intercontinental Cup second leg against Racing in Argentina after Simpson had been felled by a missile. Left for Motherwell in 1971.

Mick KEARIN
(1943-2025)
Wing-half Kearin was reputedly the first man from County Kildare to win a senior cap for the Republic of Ireland. Played his club football with St Patrick's Athletic, Bohemians and Shamrock Rovers.

Crescencio GUTIERREZ
(1933-2025)
Mexico forward of the 1950s that won five league championships with Guadalajara as well as the CONCACAF Champions Cup. Scored six goals in 12 games for Mexico, and represented *El Tri* at the 1958 World Cup in Sweden.

Willie IRVINE
(1943-2025)
Northern Ireland striker who made his name with Burnley, topping the First Division scoring charts with 29 goals in 1965-66. Never recovered consistent form after suffering a leg fracture in 1967, and later moved on to Preston, Brighton and Halifax. Scored eight goals in 23 games for Northern Ireland.

First Division winner ...Terry Hennessey at Derby County

"Wyn the Leap"... Davies at Newcastle United in the late '60s

Alan FINNEY
(1933-2025)
Left-winger Finney played 15 years and more than 500 times for Sheffield Wednesday, scoring 88 goals. He was also recognised on the international stage with England and played in the country's first U23 international in 1954. Finney played a key role in the Second Division triumphs of 1952, 1956 and 1959 and the runners-up finish behind double-winning Tottenham in 1961.

Owls icon...Finney, pictured in 1957, is third in Sheffield Wednesday's all-time appearance list

Terry HENNESSEY
(1942-2025)
A powerful wing-half, Hennessey emerged at Birmingham City in the late 1950s, captained Nottingham Forest and then won a league title with Derby County. Won 39 caps for Wales and later managed Tulsa Roughnecks to victory in the North American Soccer League in 1983.

Joey JONES
(1955-2025)
Redoubtable left-back in the Liverpool side that won their first European Cup in 1977 and successfully defended the crown the following year. Jones, who played 72 times for Wales, started his senior career at Wrexham and spent 11 years in three stints at the club who have said they would commission a statue in his honour.

In the summer of 1975, Jones was signed by Bob Paisley as a 20-year-old and featured on 14 occasions in all competitions during his debut season. He missed qualifying for a league winners' medal by one match under the rules at the time and was on the bench for both legs of the UEFA Cup final victory over Club Brugge. Jones more than made up for that the next season with 59 appearances in all competitions, as Liverpool successfully defended their league title and won their first European Cup. Later played for Chelsea and Huddersfield before finishing his career at Wrexham.

Kunishige KAMAMOTO
(1944-2025)
Japan's all-time record scorer with 75 goals in 76 internationals between 1964 and 1977. He won a bronze medal with surprise team Japan at the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City and was the tournament's seven-goal top scorer. Subsequently Kamamoto became an MP and vice-president of the Japan FA.

Japan legend...Kunishige Kamamoto scores for Japan at the 1968 Olympic Games in Mexico City

Ove KINDVALL
(1943-2025)
Ove Kindvall was one of Sweden's greatest attackers and an iconic star of Dutch football in the 1960s and 1970s. Born in Norrkoping, Kindvall began with his hometown club, winning the Swedish Allsvenskan in 1962 and 1963. He was league top scorer in 1966, earning a move to Feyenoord and being voted Swedish Footballer of the Year.

Clinical finishing quickly established him as a fans' favourite in Rotterdam. Kindvall was the Dutch league's leading marksman three times in four years and helped fire Feyenoord to the league and cup double in 1969. The title sent them into the European Cup and the club and Kindvall's greatest triumph. One year later, under Austrian coach Ernst Happel, Kindvall scored the winning goal as Feyenoord beat favourites Celtic 2-1 after extra-time in Milan.

They were the first Dutch club hailed champions of Europe and Kindvall was awarded the Svenska Dagbladet Gold Medal, an award for the most significant Swedish sports achievement of the year.

On the international stage he scored 16 goals in 43 games, featuring at both the 1970 and 1974 World Cup finals.

1970 World Cup qualifier...Ove Kindvall in action for Sweden against France in 1969

Mark LAZARUS
(1938-2025)
Right-winger Lazarus was one of London's personality footballers in the 1960s despite playing for lower division Queens Park Rangers. The pinnacle of his career came in 1967 when he hit QPR's winner in their dramatic 3-2 comeback victory over West Brom in the League Cup final. Lazarus was born in Stepney, East London, and started his career with Leyton Orient. He also played for Brentford, Wolves and Crystal Palace. After retiring, he worked in security, including assignments in boxing.

Theodoros PALLAS
(1949-2025)
Defender who played 30 times for Greece and 368 times for Aris from 1966 to 1980.

Stepan YURCHYSHYN
(1957-2025)
Ukraine-born striker and midfielder who scored one goal in four appearances for the former Soviet Union in 1979.

Frank MILL
(1958-2025)
The versatile forward was a World Cup winner with West Germany in 1990 – albeit without playing a game. He began with hometown Rot-Weiss Essen and moved up into the Bundesliga with Borussia Monchengladbach and then Borussia Dortmund, winning the German Cup in 1989. Mill scored 123 Bundesliga goals, plus 87 more in 2. Bundesliga, but none in 17 senior internationals. He had more success with the West Germany Olympic team, playing in the Games of 1984 and 1988 in Seoul where he captained the bronze medal-winning team.

Suleiman OBEID
(1984-2025)
The ex-Palestine forward was shot and killed while queuing for humanitarian aid in Gaza in early August, the Palestine FA said. A statement on X from UEFA read: "Farewell to Suleiman Al-Obeid, the 'Palestinian Pele'. A talent who gave hope to countless children, even in the darkest of times." The statement was questioned by Liverpool and Egypt star Mohamed Salah, who responded: "Can you tell us how he died, where, and why?" Obeid played his club football with Markaz Shabab Al Am'ari, Khadamat Al Shatea and Gaza Sport. He scored two goals in 24 internationals from 2007 to 2013.

Francisco Jose "Pepe" PAES
(1946-2025)
Brazil-born defender, who captained Barcelona SC to three titles and won 12 caps for Ecuador from 1979 to 1981.

Showman...Lazarus was one of London's personality footballers

German international ...Frank Mill in 1990

Feyenoord icon... De Kuip pays tribute to Dick Schneider

Andre LADNER
(1962-2025)
Defender who won four Switzerland caps while winning the title three times and the cup once with Grasshopper, before spells with Basel and Lugano.

MUN Ki-nam
(1948-2025)
North Korea international forward in the 1960s and '70s and then briefly coach of the national team before defecting to the South in 2004.

Herbert PANKAU
(1941-2025)
Attacking midfielder and right-winger who played almost all his senior career with East German side Empor Rostock (later Hansa Rostock). During his 11 years, several as captain, they were East German runners-up four times in seven years and picked up silver medals in two cup finals. Pankau totalled 257 Oberliga games for the club, scoring 30 goals. He hit four goals in 25 games for the senior GDR national team, and was a member of the "United Team of Germany" (although all the footballers came from the East) that won bronze at the 1964 Olympics.

RAMIRO
(1933-2025)
Versatile Brazil midfielder and defender with Santos and Atletico Madrid. Ramiro played 11 times for Brazil between 1955 and 1956 and won three Sao Paulo state titles as one of Pele's team-mates before transferring, with his brother Alvaro, to Atletico in 1959. In Spain, he won three Copas del Rey (1960, 1961 and 1965) and the UEFA Cup Winners' Cup in 1962.

Shidrak YOUSIF
(1942-2025)
Iraq midfielder who scored twice in 31 caps between 1965 and 1973, and claimed two Arab Cups. After retiring, he became a respected sports broadcaster.

Dick SCHNEIDER
(1948-2025)
Despite being a club icon at Go Ahead Eagles and a UEFA Cup winner with Feyenoord, Schneider won only 11 caps for the Netherlands between 1972 and 1974. One of those appearances came in a World Cup qualifier against Iceland in his native Deventer in 1973 when, after the Dutch were awarded a penalty and Johan Cruyff stepped up to take it, the 24,000-strong crowd bellowed for their hometown favourite. Schneider was handed the responsibility instead and duly scored. A year later though, he was left out of Rinus Michels' World Cup squad.

Words by Keir Radnedge & Mark Gleeson

"I had promised to Sinisa that I would come to Red Star Belgrade, and now I am here"

After being released by Internazionale, a tearful Marko Arnautovic reveals that he joined Red Star Belgrade as a promise to his friend and former coach, the late Sinisa Mihajlovic, who won the European Cup with the Serbian club in 1991

12 MOVES *you might have missed…*

TRANSFERS ★ LOANS ★ SACKINGS ★ HIRINGS ★ SWITCHES ★ RETIREMENTS

Montse TOME

Following **Spain**'s defeat to England in the 2025 Women's Euros final (more on page 86), *La Roja* parted company with Tome and named Sonia Bermudez as head coach.

Allan SAINT-MAXIMIN

The ex-Newcastle United winger joined Mexican giants **America** from Al Ahli for a fee of around €10.3m after spending last season on loan in Turkey at Fenerbahce.

REINIER

In 2020, Real Madrid paid Flamengo €30m for the attacking midfielder. But after five years and a series of loans he returned to Brazil, joining **Atletico Mineiro** on a free transfer.

Luka JOVIC

Another big-money signing for Real Madrid, costing *Los Blancos* €63m in 2019 following a prolific spell at Eintracht Frankfurt, the Serbian joined **AEK Athens** from Milan.

Jason PUNCHEON

After leading **Akritas Chlorakas** to promotion last season, Puncheon had to resign as he does not have his UEFA Pro Licence, mandatory for top-flight coaches in Cyprus.

Thomas MULLER

Having played his last game for Bayern Munich at the Club World Cup, the 35-year-old moved to Canada to join MLS high-flyers **Vancouver Whitecaps**.

Rodrigo DE PAUL

One of Lionel Messi's favourite team-mates joined him at **Inter Miami**. De Paul signed for Atletico Madrid in 2021, shortly after impressing in Argentina's Copa America victory.

Inigo MARTINEZ

Facing another summer of financial uncertainty, Barcelona reluctantly allowed their most experienced centre-back to join **Al Nassr** in the Saudi Pro League.

Nolberto SOLANO

The ex-Newcastle United and Peru star took charge of **Pakistan** after their FIFA ban was lifted. Solano, 50, will also lead the Under-23s in the upcoming U23 Asian Cup qualifiers.

Andrea PIRLO

The Italian great took the fourth managerial job of his career, joining UAE second-tier outfit **United FC**. Pirlo is yet to last much more than a year in any of his previous roles.

Wayne HENNESSEY

Aged 38, the goalkeeper retired to take up a coaching role with his club **Nottingham Forest**. He won 109 caps for **Wales** – only Gareth Bale played more games for the Dragons.

Mason GREENWOOD

Five years after his one and only England cap, the former Manchester United striker switched international allegiance to **Jamaica**, and could make his debut in September.

"I can only say good things about Gigio Donnarumma. He's one of the best players in his position…but we were looking for a different profile of goalkeeper"

PSG boss Luis Enrique confirms that goalkeeper Gianluigi Donnarumma is no longer part of his plans

SUMMER 2025 TRANSFER WINDOW

A selection of done deals in July and August involving European clubs...

£79m	**Hugo EKITIKE**	*(Eintracht Frankfurt to Liverpool)*
£73.7m	**Benjamin SESKO**	*(RB Leipzig to Manchester United)*
£71m	**Bryan MBEUMO**	*(Brentford to Manchester United)*
£65.5m	**Luis DIAZ**	*(Liverpool to Bayern Munich)*
£65m	**Victor OSIMHEN**	*(Napoli to Galatasaray)*
£64m	**Viktor GYOKERES**	*(Sporting to Arsenal)*
£58.7m	**Mateo RETEGUI**	*(Atalanta to Al Qadsiah)*
£54.8m	**Illia ZABARNYI**	*(Bournemouth to Paris Saint-Germain)*
£46.3m	**Darwin NUNEZ**	*(Liverpool to Al Hilal)*
£37m	**Jorrel HATO**	*(Ajax to Chelsea)*
£34.6m	**Bafode DIAKITE**	*(Lille to Bournemouth)*
£34.6m	**Malick THIAW**	*(Milan to Newcastle)*
£34.4m	**Lucas CHEVALIER**	*(Lille to Paris Saint-Germain)*
£34m	**Dan NDOYE**	*(Bologna to Nottingham Forest)*
£31m	**Ardon JASHARI**	*(Club Brugge to Milan)*
£30.3m	**Evann GUESSAND**	*(Nice to Aston Villa)*
£28m	**Kiernan DEWSBURY-HALL**	*(Chelsea to Everton)*
£27.5m	**Francisco CONCEICAO**	*(Porto to Juventus)*
£27m	**James TRAFFORD**	*(Burnley to Manchester City)*
£26.6m	**Sam BEUKEMA**	*(Bologna to Napoli)*
£26.2m	**Joao FELIX**	*(Chelsea to Al Nassr)*
£26.1m	**David HANCKO**	*(Feyenoord to Atletico Madrid)*
£26.1m	**Igor PAIXAO**	*(Feyenoord to Marseille)*
£25.9m	**Enzo MILLOT**	*(Stuttgart to Al Ahli)*
£23.3m	**Richard RIOS**	*(Palmeiras to Benfica)*
£23.2m	**Lesley UGOCHUKWU**	*(Chelsea to Burnley)*
£21.5m	**WESLEY**	*(Flamengo to Roma)*
£20m	**Armando BROJA**	*(Chelsea to Burnley)*
£20m	**Neil EL AYNAOUI**	*(Lens to Roma)*
£19.6m	**Franjo IVANOVIC**	*(Union Saint-Gilloise to Benfica)*
£19.5m	**SON Heung-min**	*(Tottenham Hotspur to LAFC)*
£19m	**Luis SUAREZ**	*(Almeria to Sporting)*
£18.9m	**Samuel LINO**	*(Atletico Madrid to Flamengo)*
£18.9m	**Giacomo RASPADORI**	*(Napoli to Atletico Madrid)*
£18m	**Mads HERMANSEN**	*(Leicester City to West Ham United)*
£17.9m	**Gedson FERNANDES**	*(Besiktas to Spartak Moscow)*
£17.4m	**OTAVIO**	*(Porto to Paris FC)*
£17.3m	**Koni DE WINTER**	*(Genoa to Milan)*
£17.2m	**Nathan ZEZE**	*(Nantes to Neom)*
£17.2m	**Victor FROHOLDT**	*(Copenhagen to Porto)*
£17m	**Ritsu DOAN**	*(Freiburg to Eintracht Frankfurt)*
£17m	**Pervis ESTUPINAN**	*(Brighton & Hove Albion to Milan)*
£17m	**Anton STACH**	*(Hoffenheim to Leeds United)*
£15.6m	**Anel AHMEDHODZIC**	*(Sheffield United to Feyenoord)*
£15m	**Jhon ARIAS**	*(Fluminense to Wolverhampton Wanderers)*
£15m	**Tyler MORTON**	*(Liverpool to Lyon)*
£14.2m	**Joaquin PANICHELLI**	*(Alaves to Strasbourg)*
£14m	**Marc PUBILL**	*(Almeria to Atletico Madrid)*
£13m	**Alberto COSTA**	*(Juventus to Porto)*
£13m	**Cristhian MOSQUERA**	*(Valencia to Arsenal)*
£13m	**Lucas PERRI**	*(Lyon to Leeds United)*
£13m	**Granit XHAKA**	*(Bayer Leverkusen to Sunderland)*
£12.7m	**Oscar GLOUKH**	*(Red Bull Salzburg to Ajax)*

Old Trafford unveiling... Benjamin Sesko

Bayern new boy...Luis Diaz

Marseille switch ...Igor Paixao

Comoros

The team from the Indian Ocean Islands could become Africa's smallest-ever World Cup qualifiers

The Comoros Islands are among the youngest footballing nations in the world, having joined FIFA in 2005 and played their first full international in December 2006.

It seems almost incredulous that less than two decades on, the tiny Indian Ocean archipelago has a chance of World Cup qualification, with two key clashes in September likely to determine their fate.

The Comoros sit in second place in Group I of the African qualifiers with 12 points, three behind leaders Ghana but three ahead of Mali, the other powerhouse in the section. Next up is a trip to play against the latter. Success in Bamako coupled with a win over the Central African Republic a few days later would set up the potential of a deciding clash in Ghana in October.

Only the group winners qualify automatically for the World Cup, but the best four runners-up from the nine groups get another chance via play-offs. If the Comoros fall short of top spot, they stand a good chance of keeping alive their hopes in the new-look format.

The former French colony, which sits off the east African coast, has a population of around 800,000 and no professional players or clubs. Their FIFA ranking is 107th, not far off their historic high of 103rd.

But they have already punched well above their weight, taking full advantage of their expatriate community in France, which has provided the bulk of their players and their former manager Amir Abdou, who led the team between 2014 and 2022. It was under his leadership that the Comoros made their major tournament debut at the 2021 Africa Cup of Nations, where they upset Ghana 3-2 to reach the second round before hosts Cameroon eliminated them in a tight contest.

Comoros will be back for a second appearance at the continental finals in December where they will face hosts Morocco, Zambia and Mali once again in their group. They impressively beat Tunisia 1-0 away in the qualifiers last year to book their berth.

"You know, our target was to qualify for AFCON," says their current head coach Stefano Cusin. "Now we've made our target come true. The World Cup is the dream. It shouldn't be a goal for a country like ours, but you become a coach to dream.

"If it happens it would be unbelievable, but it's very difficult because in our group we are up against some very strong teams. It's never happened in the history of football, that a nation with less than one million people qualifies for the World Cup."

Strictly speaking, that's not true – Iceland qualified in 2018 with a population of just 335,000 – but the Comoros would be the second-smallest country to reach a World Cup and the smallest African country by far.

"In any case, we will fight for our dream," adds the 56-year-old Italian, unknown in his own country, who is in his second job on the continent after previously coaching South Sudan.

The island nation cleverly looked to the old colonial power for players to help them create a competitive national team, initially setting up trial games in Marseille, where there is a large Comorian expatriate community.

Their first team was put together in just a matter of days, and most

Making history... Comoros players at the 2021 AFCON

Midfield lynchpin... Comoros captain Youssouf M'Changama

players came from lower league clubs in France.

They only entered their first World Cup qualifying campaign ahead of the 2010 finals, while it was only in the 2021 Cup of Nations qualifiers that they won a first-ever competitive international away from home. That win in Togo, plus a draw at home to Egypt, helped them finish second in their group and book a place at the finals in Cameroon.

These days the team is a lot more polished and less intimidated. "Of course, most of them grew up in Europe so this is a big advantage because they've had a background of good training," explains Cusin. "Most of them played for France at youth national team level. So we are talking about quality players – they are not amateurs."

Two Marseille-born players have been their most consistent performers: midfield kingpin and captain Youssouf M'Changama and winger Faiz Selemani. French-born Said Bakari, a former junior at Paris Saint-Germain and now in the Dutch Eredivisie with Sparta Rotterdam, is another who has been a vital and long-standing member of the side. All three were in the team that defeated Ghana 3-2 in Cameroon in early 2022 and again 1-0 at home in Moroni at the start of the 2026 World Cup qualifiers.

Of the newer generation, defender Warmed Omari from Lyon is already a mainstay, and the teenage striker Amal Boura from Monaco is seen as one to fast-track for the future.

Cusin has spent a good deal of time seeking to expand the playing pool, and it is easier now to attract promising players with Comorian heritage to play. They have also been able to use many who come from Mayotte, the island that elected to stay part of France when the three other Comoros Islands declared independence in 1975.

Cusin is also hoping some players from the islands themselves emerge, but they rarely get any international experience and the gap between their ability and those with a European upbringing is still stark. So, for the moment, he sticks with a close-knit group that has a chance to make incredible history. They see themselves as a competitive side, ready to match any side pound for pound.

"We're tactically flexible, but we've brought defensive organisation to a team that isn't very physical," adds the coach.

Mark Gleeson

The former French colony, which sits off the east African coast, has a population of around 800,000 and no professional players or clubs

Carlos Queiroz

Veteran manager eyeing a record-equalling World Cup qualification after being appointed as Oman head coach

His knee patched up after an operation, his body rested after time at his game farm in native Mozambique and on the coast in Portugal, the 72-year-old Carlos Queiroz is showing no signs of slowing down.

He will be leading Oman's bid for a first-ever World Cup place, appointed in July to replace Rashid Jaber after they had failed at the first attempt but have another chance via Asia's fourth round in October. Oman will play against Qatar and the United Arab Emirates in a mini-league tournament to determine a place at the finals. They each play a single game against each other in Doha, and the group winners qualify for next year's tournament in North America, while the runners-up get a further opportunity in a two-legged play-off in November.

Praised by players for his work ethic and astute coaching, Queiroz has managed Real Madrid and worked as Sir Alex Ferguson's assistant at Manchester United. Oman is his eighth different national team and he is bidding to coach at a record-equalling fifth consecutive World Cup.

While Brazilian Carlos Alberto Parreira holds the record of coaching at six World Cups, it is the Serb Bora Milutinovic who has the record for coaching at successive tournaments – five from 1986 to 2002, all with different countries.

Queiroz has also collected the air miles in his lengthy coaching career, which started at youth level after he had completed university in Lisbon, eschewing any hopes of a playing career.

His success with Portugal in back-to-back Under-20 World Cups in 1989 and 1991 brought him instant recognition as he fostered a "golden generation" of players that included Luis Figo, Rui Costa and Joao Pinto.

Queiroz should have gone to his first World Cup with South Africa in 2002. But after qualifying the country in impressive fashion, overcoming a logistically difficult qualifying campaign, he was the victim of internal politics and fired ahead of the tournament in Japan and South Korea.

World Cup hero... Queiroz after leading Iran to victory over Wales in 2022

By that time, he had already had his first stint as coach of Portugal (1991-93), and it was his return to the helm of the *Selecao* that he belatedly got to coach at a World Cup, in South Africa in 2010.

He then took Iran to three successive tournaments in 2014, 2018 and 2022, without progressing to the knockout rounds but did oversee the dramatic defeat of Wales in the last tournament in Qatar.

His other national team posts have been with October's opponents, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar – guiding the former to third place at the Arabian Gulf Cup in 1998 – as well as Colombia and Egypt, whom he led to the 2021 Africa Cup of Nations final where they lost to Senegal on penalties in Cameroon.

> Oman is Queiroz's eighth different national team, and he is bidding to coach at a record-equalling fifth consecutive World Cup

The Oman job ended an 18-month hiatus in Queiroz's coaching career after his contract was terminated by Qatar in December 2023. There were talks with Tunisia late last year, but they never gained any traction.

The Portuguese coach has a long-standing reputation for thriving on confrontation and has had many tetchy touchline brushes, but he is perhaps better known for the meticulous nature of his preparations and the all-consuming approach to his jobs. He and his small team of assistants will be looking for any advantage to give Oman every chance of getting to the 2026 World Cup and for Queiroz to make it five in a row.

Mark Gleeson

Mjallby AIF

The unlikely village team mounting a shock title challenge and taking Swedish football by storm

Based in a village of fewer than 1,500 inhabitants, and having almost gone out of business as a third-tier club just seven years ago, the fact that Mjallby exist at all is an impressive feat. That they play in the Allsvenskan, the highest level of Swedish football, is even more remarkable; that they're on track to lift their first-ever league title is a borderline miracle.

On August 9, they visited the home of reigning champions Malmo and secured a 3-1 win to maintain a four-point lead at the top of the table.

Malmo were runaway winners in 2024, claiming their fourth title in five years and a record-extending 27th overall, but this result left them in fifth place, 13 points off top spot.

Mjallby undoubtedly benefitted from the kind of fortune that teams on a good run of form tend to get. Herman Johansson opened the scoring with a heavily deflected strike, Elliot Stroud added a second with a shot that should have been saved by Malmo's Robin Olsen (the veteran Sweden goalkeeper who recently re-joined his hometown club from Aston Villa), while the third goal by Viktor Gustafson was the result of some disastrous hesitation in the champions' defence.

Yet they also defended with determination and organisation, resisted waves of attacks and frustrated their more decorated opponents. It was their fifth win in a row and 11th game unbeaten.

Keeping pace in second place is Hammarby, last year's runners-up but a club with only one league title to their name (back in 2001). Still, they have the advantage of being based in Stockholm. Meanwhile, a six-hour drive south of the capital city lies Mjallby.

The club itself plays its home games five minutes further down the road in the seaside village of Hallevik, a settlement with a population of 1,485. The club's picturesque Strandvallen stadium seats 6,750, drawing in fans from all over the surrounding villages within the remote municipality of Solvesborg. As the crow flies, it is actually closer to Denmark, Poland and Germany than it is to Stockholm. As sporting director Hasse Larsson told *The Guardian*: "When teams come here on the bus they drive and drive, through the farms, past the fishing harbours. They keep driving and then, when they can't drive any further, they find our stadium."

Huge win...Mjallby players celebrate beating Malmo
Photo credit: Alamy

> "When teams come here on the bus they keep driving and then, when they can't drive any further, they find our stadium"
>
> Mjallby sporting director Hasse Larsson

That remoteness has probably aided them – at the end of May they marked a year without a home league defeat – as has the steady hand of Larsson, chairman Magnus Emeus and manager Anders Torstensson. Under their guidance, the club has become a slick operation both on and off the pitch, topping the table with one of the smallest budgets in the league and an average attendance of just 4,826.

Stroud, signed from third-tier Oddevold in 2023, is one of several smart recruits. The 23-year-old's goal against Malmo was his sixth of the campaign, making him the club's joint-top scorer this season alongside 20-year-old Gambian forward Abdoulie Manneh who arrived from Wallidan in his home country last year. At the back, Danish-born defender Abdullah Iqbal has 16 caps for Pakistan.

Having already played (and beaten) Hammarby twice, the rest of Mjallby's campaign is simply about remaining consistent until the season ends in November. If they can do that, they will be one of the smallest national champions in European history.

Jamie Evans

Serie A

The prospect of an Italian top-flight fixture being played overseas is inching closer

Milan fan club...the Italian giants have a large fanbase in Australia

Serie A is bidding to make history by taking a match abroad for the first time. If given the green light, it could represent a watershed moment.

For years, decision-makers at the top of Italian football have explored ways of staging league games abroad in order to promote their brand, build fanbases and generate extra revenue. This season, the clash between Milan and Como has given them the opportunity to do just that.

UEFA and FIFA are considering the proposal to switch the match to Australia, specifically the city of Perth. The idea, which will also need to be approved by the Asian Football Confederation and Football Australia, has already received the backing of Italy's governing body, the FIGC.

Until now, FIFA has vetoed all such requests for what it calls "out-of-territory" league games. Last year, however, following a lawsuit brought by the sports media agency Relevent, the world's governing body set up a working party to review its stance.

Milan's home game against Como, due to be played at the San Siro on the weekend of February 7-8, clashes with the opening ceremony of the 2026 Winter Olympics, which will be held at the stadium.

Determined to help raise his league's global profile, Serie A president Ezio Simonelli has been keen to exploit the need to find another venue as an opportunity to take the competition abroad. In June, an invitation was received from Perth to stage the fixture at the city's 60,000-capacity Optus Stadium.

Milan have a two million-strong fanbase in Australia with supporters' clubs in Melbourne, Adelaide and Sydney. The club has forged a good relationship with the country and with the Western Australia state government. In May 2024, a crowd of 56,000 saw the team lose 5-2 to Roma in an exhibition match at the Optus Stadium. On their pre-season tour this summer, they returned to face the local A-League side Perth Glory, winning 9-0 at HBF Park.

> "People who live football, who talk and want to enjoy their team can't do that. It doesn't seem like the right thing to do"
>
> **Como head coach Cesc Fabregas**

At the Serie A assembly in July, Simonelli was cautiously optimistic that Milan would return to the city early next year to contest a league fixture.

"It's a long and complex process," he said. "I must say that, until now,

Milan v Roma... the clubs attracted a big crowd for a friendly in 2024

we've not had any negative signals. We're trying, it's not certain that it'll happen, but I think it might."

Both Milan and Como are understood to be open to the idea, which would involve a 17,000-mile round trip for the players in the middle of the season. Significantly, neither club will be involved in European competition.

Como head coach Cesc Fabregas, however, has reservations: "Especially for us, the Como people and the club, returning after 21 years to play against Juventus and Milan, people want to go and see it live. People who live football, who talk and want to enjoy their team can't do that. It doesn't seem like the right thing to do."

Historically, Italy has been at the forefront of European football's quest to export the domestic game. In 1993, the Italian Super Cup between Milan and Torino was staged in Washington D.C. Since 2002, the event – now a four-team mini-tournament – has been hosted in Libya, China, Qatar and Saudi Arabia. Similar showpiece fixtures in Spanish and French football have also been played abroad.

For years, however, Europe has tried to follow the example set by professional sport in the United States in expanding the exposure of its major competitions. In 2008, the Premier League suggested adding to the regular 38-game season an extra round of matches, which would be played in cities around the world. The controversial "39th game" idea was abandoned after opposition from supporters and FIFA.

La Liga has also been pushing hard for its brand to be seen outside Spain. In 2018, it tried to switch a fixture between Barcelona and Girona to Miami, only to be thwarted due to a "lack of consensus". In August of this year, the Spanish FA approved plans for December's clash between Villarreal and Barcelona to take place in Miami, although Real Madrid joined fan groups of both clubs in strongly opposing the fixture's change of venue.

Serie A is expecting a response from FIFA and UEFA to its request by the end of September when, presumably, they will also deliver their verdict on the Spanish request too.

Greg Whelan

The Cosmos

The club of Pele and Beckenbauer has been reformed once again

Rich history...Franz Beckenbauer, Pele, Giorgio Chinaglia and Romerito line up before a Cosmos game

The Cosmos are back. For the third time, America's most famous soccer club will take to the field.

From 2026 onwards, the Cosmos – dropping "New York" from their name – will feature in the United Soccer League One, the third tier of the domestic pyramid, playing out of the historic Hinchliffe Stadium in Paterson, New Jersey.

It's in the Garden State, at the Giants Stadium, that the Cosmos enjoyed their glory days and introduced football to mainstream America. Pele, with Franz Beckenbauer and Carlos Alberto in his slipstream, provided the star power and drama. The perception of soccer as an outward, foreign eccentricity was replaced by one of sex and rock and roll. The club – like the rest of the North American Soccer League (NASL) – flourished briefly before collapsing.

In 2010, Paul Kemsley, the former vice-president of Tottenham Hotspur, revived the club. The Cosmos returned to Hofstra, where they had trained in the 1970s. Pele was wheeled out as an ambassador, Eric Cantona enjoyed a short-lived spell as director and even Real Madrid legend Raul was signed.

But the relaunch never quite captured the public imagination. They won three titles in a revived version of the NASL but remained on the fringes of the New York City sports scene. In 2018, the second iteration of the NASL folded and the Cosmos became dormant again.

So, can the third edition of the Cosmos become sustainable and weave themselves into the fabric of American soccer once and for all?

North Jersey Pro Soccer, headed up by real estate developer Baye Adofo-Wilson, acquired the primary rights to the name, logo and other intellectual property from Rocco Commisso, the Fiorentina owner who will retain a minority stake in the club. In his role as CEO, Erik Stover will provide continuity; as COO of the Cosmos 2.0, he not only signed Raul but also landed a high-profile kit deal with Emirates.

This time, Stover is flanked by Giuseppe Rossi, a New Jersey-born former Italy international, who will serve as head of football. At the launch, Rossi said: "The real magic will be the players we develop right here in North Jersey. We're going to show what it means to be a Cosmo. The values, the style, the community – that's what draws people in."

The blueprint is simple: be a community-driven club with a focus on talent development. In 2027, the club plans to establish a women's team in the USL Super League, one of two top-flight leagues in the American women's game.

Don't expect the Cosmos to take the American scene by storm. A decade ago, the club missed the opportunity to join Major League Soccer, but the new owners seem more grounded. The legacy of the old Cosmos is undisputed, but the new iteration wants to immerse itself in North Jersey to show that it is more than simply a nostalgic crest for collectors of yesteryear's brand.

Samindra Kunti

eye witness

Jon Arnold reports

UNITED STATES

The MLS All-Stars

All-Star 25...the back of the shirt of one of the MLS All-Stars training before this year's edition

From a baseball game played at the 1933 World's Fair in Chicago to the modern iterations celebrated by all the United States' major sports leagues, All-Star Games always have been something of a spectacle.

Despite sports' quest to make each competition mean something, the All-Star game rewrites that script and states proudly that it is an exhibition, a game to enjoy once and think about no more. Being named an "All-Star" is a prize to be savoured – it provides extra recognition, a bonus and the trip to the game with your family in tow – the deserved spoils of a good first half of the year.

So, it is no surprise that Major League Soccer's version once again sits at the nexus of the culture clash the league so often finds itself navigating: soccer purists have one view, while fans of traditional American leagues have another.

Over the years, MLS has tried different formats that would please both elements of its current fanbase and also bring in new fans. After the traditional (to US sports) East v West, MLS trialled "USA v the World" games before settling into inviting a European team on a pre-season US tour to serve as the opponent. But rivalry called, and the 2025 game in Austin was the fourth edition of MLS' All-Stars against their Liga MX counterparts.

It is a natural opponent for MLS, though not necessarily one that is guaranteed to continue being the opposition. The two leagues have a genuine rivalry thanks to Mexican clubs' dominance of the CONCACAF Champions Cup – much to MLS' chagrin – and the legions of Liga MX fans who live in the US, most of whom live and die with their team in Mexico and are apathetic toward the MLS team in their local market. Changing those fans' notions about MLS and convincing them to adopt a team – or at least to keep buying tickets for events like the All-Star Game – sits at the heart of the strategy of keeping the current format in place.

Suspended...Messi watched Inter Miami's next MLS game from the stands

Both teams make an effort to bring their best. This year, however, that proved more of a challenge than in the past. Lionel Messi missed out on last year's contest with a knock, but had no injury excuse he could use to opt out this year. Well, no excuse other than having played in the Club World Cup, and a series of MLS matches before and after that tournament, and the CONCACAF Champions Cup plus getting set for the Leagues Cup – a tournament that pits MLS v Liga MX on the club level.

Class of '25...the MLS XI poses for a team photo ahead of this year's All-Star clash

LIST OF MAJOR LEAGUE SOCCER ALL-STAR GAMES...

1996 MLS East **3-2** MLS West
1997 MLS East **5-4** MLS West
1998 MLS USA **6-1** MLS World
1999 MLS East **4-6** MLS West
2000 MLS West **4-9** MLS East
2001 MLS West **6-6** MLS East
2002 MLS All-Stars **3-2** USA
2003 MLS All-Stars **3-1** Guadalajara
2004 MLS East **3-2** MLS West
2005 MLS All-Stars **4-1** Fulham
2006 MLS All-Stars **1-0** Chelsea
2007 MLS All-Stars **2-0** Celtic
2008 MLS All-Stars **3-2** West Ham United
2009 MLS All-Stars **1-1 (p)** Everton
2010 MLS All-Stars **2-5** Manchester United
2011 MLS All-Stars **0-4** Manchester United
2012 MLS All-Stars **3-2** Chelsea
2013 MLS All-Stars **1-3** Roma
2014 MLS All-Stars **2-1** Bayern Munich
2015 MLS All-Stars **2-1** Tottenham Hotspur
2016 MLS All-Stars **1-2** Arsenal
2017 MLS All-Stars **1-1 (p)** Real Madrid
2018 MLS All-Stars **1-1 (p)** Juventus
2019 MLS All-Stars **0-3** Atletico Madrid
2021 MLS All-Stars **(p) 1-1** Liga MX All-Stars
2022 MLS All-Stars **2-1** Liga MX All-Stars
2023 MLS All-Stars **0-5** Arsenal
2024 MLS All-Stars **1-4** Liga MX All-Stars
2025 MLS All-Stars **3-1** Liga MX All-Stars

Skills challenge...former MLS star Clint Dempsey attempts to hit the crossbar

YouTube sensation...streaming superstar IShowSpeed was among the event's guests

Skippers...Sergio Ramos and Evander

That led to a days-long discussion about whether or not Messi would arrive in Austin and grace the field for a cameo of 15 minutes or so. That isn't just the Messi discount on time: with a desire to return everyone to their clubs in optimal condition, most players end up seeing less than 30 minutes of game time.

In the end, Messi never showed, a decision that earned him a suspension for Inter Miami's next league game. It also denied fans the chance to see him take on his old *El Clasico* rival Sergio Ramos, who captained the Liga MX side. Ramos' former Real Madrid team-mate James Rodriguez also ducked out of the game, but with fellow Spaniard and club team-mate Sergio Canales, Mexico No.1 Luis Malagon, Tigres ace Juan Brunetta and 16-year-old hot shot Gilberto Mora, Liga MX had plenty of high-profile quality in their ranks.

The players who do turn up – and understand the quirks of an All-Star event – can make the most of a low-intensity trip to a fine MLS city.

Driving home the message about the event being all for fun and entertainment, the night before the match sees the All-Star Skills challenge, with players taking on apparatuses built to test their precision passing, their shooting accuracy and other elements of the game. It ends with a crossbar challenge, which was improbably won this year by Vancouver Whitecaps goalkeeper Yohei Takaoka. In line with the viral tweets asking for a mortal to compete in each Olympic event, MLS invited streamer IShowSpeed to Austin. The 20-year-old – given name Darren Watkins – participated in a pair of events, providing an example of what a non-pro could do. The younger All-Stars on both the MLS and Liga MX teams seemed to enjoy interacting with the streaming star.

The match itself was buoyed by Austin supporters, who had turned out in their thousands even to see some of the ancillary events earlier during the week, including an All-Star Game designed to showcase the future stars in MLS academies. Unlike past All-Star hosts, the Austin supporters' group was prepared with their usual repertoire of songs and chants, serenading hometown hero Brad Stuver, the starting MLS goalkeeper, and other Austin stars.

While Mora scored, continuing to increase the hype and the asking price ahead of his 18th birthday when he is expected to move from Club Tijuana to Europe, it was otherwise a great night for MLS. Forwards Sam Surridge, Tai Baribo and Brian White each found the back of the net to lift MLS to a 3-1 win – revenge for the 4-1 defeat they suffered to the same opponent last year.

The All-Star Game is going nowhere, but change is very possible

Whether or not there will be another opportunity for revenge remains up in the air. While MLS and Liga MX are working closely together for the time being, the spectre of Liga MX playing regular season matches in the US looms as a serious threat to MLS' continued growth. Those same fans that MLS are trying to woo by increasing contact with Liga MX teams, not just in the All-Star Game but also in the Leagues Cup, may see no use in supporting another league if their favourite clubs are playing competitive games in their own backyards.

A new leader should take over Liga MX soon, with current president Mikel Arriola serving as both the president of the Mexican federation and the top role in the league. Whether or not that person sees MLS as a partner, like Arriola does, will determine much of the atmosphere about the two leagues working together.

Arriola and the Liga MX owners he tries to get consensus from have generally looked to MLS more than vice versa. While Mexico's clubs have been better on the field, and the history and mystique around them certainly lend a romantic counterbalance to the often corporate feel of MLS, executives south of the border admit that MLS has it beat at the box office and in the marketing game.

That's why Liga MX has made some modifications to its league including freezing promotion and relegation, a move cribbed directly from MLS' franchise system. Decisions like those have attracted new faces to the table at the owners' meetings, with American businessman Marc Spiegel buying Queretaro this summer. They became the second US group to buy in after

the star-studded NX football group, which includes Eva Longoria and Wrexham duo Rob McElhenney and Ryan Reynolds among other celebrities, purchased a stake in Necaxa.

Next year's All-Star Game, the 30th edition, will take place in Charlotte, North Carolina, and it will be highly anticipated. MLS commissioner Don Garber said Austin raised the bar when it comes to what is expected as an All-Star host. For now, which teams will be involved is still to be decided.

In addition to the match and skills competition, All-Star also serves as a league convention of sorts, with the owners, sporting directors and other officials from all clubs gathering in the same place. The league's Board of Governors meets to speak about potential modifications, and this year's edition was anticipated because of a number of potentially seismic changes being rumoured.

Instead, while Garber announced the framework of an "MLS 3.0" at his annual news conference ahead of the All-Star Game, little actually got over the line when it comes to changes that would revolutionise the league ahead of the 2026 World Cup. Instead, fans will be waiting another six months to hear about potential loosening of roster regulations to allow for teams to sign more stars like the ones on the field of Q2 Stadium. They'll also, again, see a decision on whether MLS will move to a calendar that more closely resembles the European one or if they will continue to use the current dates that run from the late winter to the late fall.

Once again, it seems, MLS is stuck between what makes the most sense to those who are familiar with other soccer leagues around the world and what makes sense to American sports traditionalists.

The All-Star Game is going nowhere, but change is very possible when it comes to who the opponent is, who is required to play in it and how the league it is celebrating chooses to present itself to fans in the US and beyond. MLS must find a way to continue being a spectacle, taking a cue from its own All-Star Game and simply having fun with it, but also to be taken seriously in world soccer – and to keep the owners happy and the interest of enough fans hoping to spend their money to enjoy the product.

WHO ARE THE ALL-STARS?

The MLS squad is selected through a combination of fan voting and selections by the appointed manager and league commissioner

MLS ALL-STARS 2025 SQUAD

GOALKEEPERS

Dayne ST CLAIR *(Minnesota United & Canada)*
Brad STUVER *(Austin FC & United States)*
Yohei TAKAOKA *(Vancouver Whitecaps & Japan)*

DEFENDERS

Maximilian ARFSTEN *(Columbus Crew & United States)*
Guilherme BIRO *(Austin FC & Brazil)*
Tristan BLACKMON *(Vancouver Whitecaps & United States)*
Michael BOXALL *(Minnesota United & New Zealand)*
Alex FREEMAN *(Orlando City & United States)*
Jakob GLESNES *(Philadelphia Union & Norway)*
Andy NAJAR *(Nashville SC & Honduras)*
Miles ROBINSON *(FC Cincinnati & United States)*
Kai WAGNER *(Philadelphia Union & Germany)*

MIDFIELDERS

Sebastian BERHALTER *(Vancouver Whitecaps & United States)*
Cristian ESPINOZA *(San Jose Earthquakes & Argentina)*
EVANDER *(FC Cincinnati & Brazil)*
Carles GIL *(New England Revolution & Spain)*
Diego LUNA *(Real Salt Lake & United States)*
Hany MUKHTAR *(Nashville SC & Germany)*
Jeppe TVERSKOV *(San Diego FC & Denmark)*
Obed VARGAS *(Seattle Sounders & Mexico)*
Philip ZINCKERNAGEL *(Chicago Fire & Denmark)*

FORWARDS

Tai BARIBO *(Philadelphia Union & Israel)*
Denis BOUANGA *(Los Angeles FC & Gabon)*
Anders DREYER *(San Diego FC & Denmark)*
Hirving LOZANO *(San Diego FC & Mexico)*
Marco PASALIC *(Orlando City & Croatia)*
Diego ROSSI *(Columbus Crew & Uruguay)*
Sam SURRIDGE *(Nashville SC & England)*
Brian WHITE *(Vancouver Whitecaps & United States)*

LIGA MX ALL-STARS 2025 SQUAD

GOALKEEPERS

Luis MALAGON *(Club America & Mexico)*
Kevin MIER *(Cruz Azul & Colombia)*

DEFENDERS

Alonso ACEVES *(Pachuca & Mexico)*
Willer DITTA *(Cruz Azul & Colombia)*
Gustavo FERRAREIS *(Puebla & Brazil)*
Jesus GALLARDO *(Toluca & Mexico)*
Luan GARCIA *(Toluca & Brazil)*
Joaquim HENRIQUE *(Tigres UANL & Brazil)*
Sergio RAMOS *(Monterrey & Spain)*
Israel REYES *(Club America & Mexico)*

MIDFIELDERS

Alan BAUTISTA *(Pachuca & Mexico)*
Juan BRUNETTA *(Tigres UANL & Argentina)*
Sergio CANALES *(Monterrey & Spain)*
Kevin CASTANEDA *(Tijuana & Mexico)*
Rodrigo DOURADO *(Atletico San Luis & Brazil)*
Elias MONTIEL *(Pachuca & Mexico)*
Gilberto MORA *(Tijuana & Mexico)*
Agustin PALAVECINO *(Necaxa & Argentina)*
Brian RODRIGUEZ *(Club America & Uruguay)*
Alejandro ZENDEJAS *(Club America & United States)*

FORWARDS

Roberto ALVARADO *(Guadalajara & Mexico)*
Diber CAMBINDO *(Necaxa & Colombia)*
Angel SEPULVEDA *(Cruz Azul & Mexico)*

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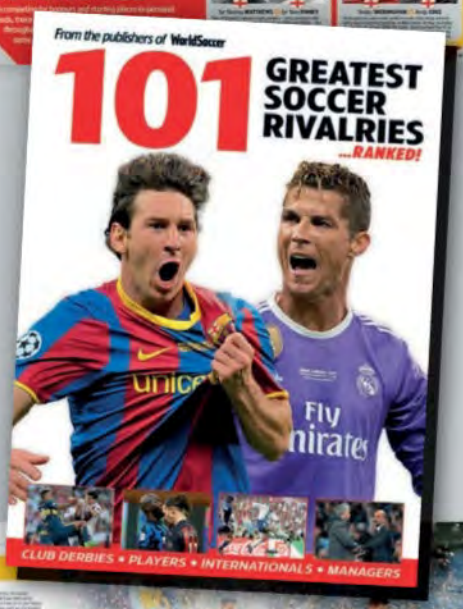
101 GREATEST SOCCER RIVALRIES ...RANKED!



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Big-spending Liverpool aiming for title 21

The addition of Florian Wirtz and Co. makes Arne Slot's Reds the team to beat – but Arsenal and Manchester City will be competitive

Bouncing back...can Pep Guardiola rebuild Manchester City after a disappointing 2024-25 campaign?

Arne Slot won the Premier League with Jurgen Klopp's players. Liverpool's head coach has now added his own choices, especially the formidable, technical Florian Wirtz, and the team look even stronger than when motoring to last season's Premier League title. It is hard to argue against the case for Liverpool to win a 21st title, and the Kop will take particular pleasure in moving clear of Manchester United as the English club with most titles. Liverpool are firmly back on their perch and Wirtz could cement them there.

For £116m including add-ons, much is inevitably expected of the Germany international. Doubters claim Wirtz will need time to settle in a new country and league. That's an unnecessarily cautious and downright negative prognosis. Wirtz speaks good English and joins a club with a welcoming dressing room, staff and support. He is a close friend of fellow new signing Jeremie Frimpong, who even turned up at his house in Germany to check on Wirtz when he was injured.

Hilariously, one media outlet even ran a poll claiming Wirtz would struggle because no Germans had flourished in the Premier League before. Well, apart from Bernd Leno, Antonio Rudiger, Per Mertesacker, Robert Huth, Didi Hamann, Ilkay Gundogan and Jurgen Klinsmann. And that's just a German seven-a-side team that would take some beating, especially with Klopp as manager.

Wirtz is one of those footballers who would excel in any era, in any style. He's tough and technical. He reads the game expertly, sensing opportunity quicker than others. Wirtz could prove a contender for Footballer of the Year, especially if Liverpool retain their title.

It's hard to see a better pair of full-backs in the league than Liverpool's newcomers, Milos Kerkez and Frimpong, whose right-sided versatility will come in useful when Mo Salah heads to the Africa Cup of Nations in December.

It will be an emotional season for Liverpool following the tragic death of Diogo Jota. Banners in the Kop and the song on countless lips show that Jota remains in Liverpool hearts and thoughts. There will be a collective will to win the title in Jota's memory.

Arsenal will challenge closely but may have to settle for second again. Mikel Arteta has strengthened well, and finally brought in a proper No.9 in Viktor Gyokeres. Martin Zubimendi will slot seamlessly into midfield.

Exciting signing ...Liverpool spent big on Florian Wirtz

Manchester City keep being doubted but have also recruited well. Defence remains slightly unconvincing, although Rayan Ait-Nouri will bring balance and a buccaneering quality to the left. Rodri, once back to full fitness, will help protect the back-line alongside Tijjani Reijnders.

Liverpool, Arsenal and City look set to engage in a proper title race. Last season proved a procession for Liverpool, easing up towards the end and still winning by a ten-point margin. These are three very good sides, well-managed and with plenty of quality reinforcements waiting on the bench. Liverpool, though, have the edge.

Henry Winter

Leading the attack ... Arsenal new boy Viktor Gyokeres

WHO'S WHO?

ARSENAL
Manager: Mikel Arteta

ASTON VILLA
Manager: Unai Emery

BOURNEMOUTH
Manager: Andoni Iraola

BRENTFORD
Manager: Keith Andrews

BRIGHTON & HOVE ALBION
Manager: Fabian Hurzeler

BURNLEY
Manager: Scott Parker

CHELSEA
Manager: Enzo Maresca

CRYSTAL PALACE
Manager: Oliver Glasner

EVERTON
Manager: David Moyes

FULHAM
Manager: Marco Silva

LEEDS UNITED
Manager: Daniel Farke

LIVERPOOL
Manager: Arne Slot

MANCHESTER CITY
Manager: Pep Guardiola

MANCHESTER UNITED
Manager: Ruben Amorim

NEWCASTLE UNITED
Manager: Eddie Howe

NOTTINGHAM FOREST
Manager: Nuno Espirito Santo

SUNDERLAND
Manager: Regis Le Bris

TOTTENHAM HOTSPUR
Manager: Thomas Frank

WEST HAM UNITED
Manager: Graham Potter

WOLVERHAMPTON WANDERERS
Manager: Vitor Pereira

Back in the Premier League...can Leeds United stay up?

PROMOTED TRIO MUST IMPRESS

It is important for English football, and the pyramid culture, that those who've risen from the Championship – Leeds United, Burnley and Sunderland – acquit themselves well in the Premier League. It was a poor look for the Premier League and Football League last season when the promoted trio of Ipswich Town, Southampton and Leicester City went full hokey-cokey – in, out, shaken all about.

Leeds United have strengthened with £75m in new signings and have the old Elland Road factor. Burnley will miss James Trafford in goal but Kyle Walker brings expertise to the defence and experience around the dressing-room. Scott Parker will need all his man-management to keep the Clarets up. It will also be a struggle for Sunderland, even with Granit Xhaka's nous and hunger and £100m in new signings. Manager Regis Le Bris can at least use all the pre-season predictions of their likely travails to stir up the dressing room.

THE EVER-DEMANDING CALENDAR

Will the lingering effects of the Club World Cup, and a busy summer, have a delayed effect on Chelsea, draining them in the long march through the

PLAYERS TO WATCH

ELLIOT ANDERSON
(Nottingham Forest)
Has all the qualities to be a top-class No.6, shielding the defence and building moves. Tenacious, super fit and capable of defence-splitting passes. Big season for the 22-year-old, who could make England's World Cup squad.

SEAN LONGSTAFF
(Leeds United)
The 27-year-old midfielder has a few points to prove, just like the club he has joined. His career might have drifted at Newcastle United but Leeds fans will love his box-to-box energy, commitment and eye for the occasional goal.

GRANIT XHAKA
(Sunderland)
Leader, midfielder, mentor – the ex-Arsenal man is an inspired signing by the Black Cats. The Switzerland skipper will make a good guide to the Premier League, having played in it 225 times, and that left foot will open up a few defensive back-lines.

PATRICK DORGU
(Manchester United)
Made a slow start to his Manchester United career, but the Dane now looks fully up and running. Faces competition from Diego Leon at left wing-back, but has the aggression and stamina required for the demanding role.

MAX DOWMAN
(Arsenal)
Might begin the season with the Under-21s, but the attacking midfielder's rise looks unstoppable. Will turn 16 on New Year's Eve, at which point the left-footed dribbler will be allowed to play in the Champions League.

Under pressure... Manchester United boss Ruben Amorim

winter months? Will the Africa Cup of Nations from December 21 to January 18 have an impact on the Premier League season? Egypt's Mohamed Salah could miss five Liverpool games, including Arsenal away. Manchester United could be without Cameroon's Bryan Mbeumo for the trip to Elland Road and the Manchester derby at Old Trafford. The other tournament that could influence the season is the forthcoming World Cup, as players raise their form to try to get into their national team manager's thoughts.

TIME TO DELIVER FOR AMORIM

Ruben Amorim's ability to mould his Manchester United stars into a 3-4-2-1 formation will be watched closely. He's been backed heavily in the transfer market and recruited players who fit the system, notably No.10s like Mbeumo and Matheus Cunha, and wing-backs like 18-year-old Diego Leon. There's pressure on Amorim, not simply because results were so poor last season but because United have traditionally played with wingers. Amorim needs a strong start.

> There's pressure on Ruben Amorim – and not simply because results were so poor last season

THE REVOLUTION WILL BE TELEVISED

New season, new broadcast innovations. To keep the game's bankrollers happy, and seemingly accelerate the Americanisation of English football, the Premier League grants TV access to dressing-rooms but they will not be able to relay audio. It should still provide some fascinating glimpses of body language. Broadcasters will also be able to interview substitutes after they have cooled down. These interviews rarely elicit much insight partly because the player is exhausted and unwilling to open up, and questions lack substance. There will doubtless still be a few apologies for subs turning the on-air blue.

WORK BEGINS FOR FOOTBALL REGULATOR

Fans' protests will continue this season over the usual range of issues: ticket prices, die-hard supporters being moved to accommodate corporates, changes to concessions, and general frustrations with certain ownerships, particularly the Glazers at Manchester United. Fans have become more active, emboldened by success in stopping the European Super League. Now they have the fans' friend, the Independent Football Regulator arriving to help them. The IFR risks being submerged by demands for action and will need to concentrate on its main priorities: tracking clubs' sustainability and accountability, and not get side-tracked with every grievance amongst disparate fanbases.

Henry Winter

Access all areas ...TV cameras will be allowed inside Premier League changing rooms

MOHAMMED KUDUS
(Tottenham Hotspur)
Quick, skilful, goalscoring wide player, who has the capability to withstand a robust full-back's attentions. Kudus is tough, fairly press-resistant and should prosper at Spurs, especially if new manager Thomas Frank improves his final ball.

RAYAN CHERKI
(Manchester City)
Expect the unexpected – perhaps something Pep Guardiola's team needs. Brought in from Lyon to provide plenty of options for City, with the ability to attack from wide or more central. Already a senior France international at 21.

ESTEVAO
(Chelsea)
The latest Brazilian wonderkid. Believe the hype? Chelsea fans are understandably excited to see more of this 18-year-old attacking prodigy, already a full Brazil international. Mature decision-making for one so young.

CAOIMHIN KELLEHER
(Brentford)
At 26, the Irish keeper was really too good to be sitting on the bench at Liverpool but, of course, had the mighty Alisson in front of him. Looks a typically well-priced recruit by Brentford. Calm shot-stopper.

JOAO PEDRO
(Chelsea)
Smart signing by the Blues. Just what they need. A reliable finisher who can also link with midfield, and provide an option wide. Interesting to see who takes the penalties, Joao Pedro or Cole Palmer.

'Start of an era'

The arrival of Xabi Alonso to the Real Madrid dugout adds intrigue to the La Liga title race

New-look Barcelona...loan star Marcus Rashford celebrates with his new team-mates

When Xabi Alonso was unveiled as Real Madrid's new manager in May, he captured the significance of the moment: "The start of an era."

For the Bernabeu faithful, Alonso's return evokes fond memories. From 2009 to 2014, the elegant midfielder helped guide the club to a La Liga title, two Copa del Rey trophies and the long-awaited 2014 Champions League triumph, "*La Decima*" – although he was suspended for the dramatic final victory itself against Atletico Madrid.

His appointment invites inevitable comparisons to another former player who made the leap to the Real Madrid dugout, Zinedine Zidane. Under Zizou's leadership, *Los Blancos* captured two La Liga crowns and an unprecedented hat-trick of Champions League titles. *Madridistas* will be hoping lightning strikes twice.

Perhaps more surprisingly, Alonso's arrival drew praise across enemy lines. Barcelona head coach Hansi Flick only had kind words: "I spoke with him when he worked in Leverkusen. I like him. I am happy to see him here."

That goodwill will soon be tested. The first *El Clasico* of the season is scheduled for October 26, and Flick currently boasts an unblemished record in the rivalry; four games, four wins.

To challenge that narrative, Alonso has overseen a defensive overhaul. Trent Alexander-Arnold and Dean Huijsen were signed from the Premier League, and the pair had the rare opportunity to integrate early with the squad during the Club World Cup in the United States earlier this summer. Left-back Alvaro Carreras, a €50 million capture from Benfica, has also been brought in, returning to the club where he featured during his formative years.

Another promising addition is Franco Mastantuono, an 18-year-old sensation from River Plate. Touted as one of South America's brightest talents, he also featured in the Club World Cup, albeit for his former club.

Perhaps the most promising young talent to emerge in the US came from within the club's ranks: striker Gonzalo Garcia. The 21-year-old joint-topped the tournament's scoring charts with four goals, and provides a more traditional No.9 option alongside the wide forwards Kylian Mbappe, Vinicius Junior and Rodrygo.

Barcelona, too, have welcomed some new attacking options. Skilful Sweden Under-21 winger Roony Bardghji arrived from Copenhagen for a modest €2 million – a calculated gamble, given that he was sidelined for most of 2024-25 with an ACL injury, having first caught the eye in the 2023-24 Champions League. He'll hope to share minutes with Lamine Yamal, who has inherited the club's iconic No.10 shirt after Ansu Fati's loan move to Monaco.

Start of an era...Xabi Alonso is unveiled as new Real Madrid boss

On the opposite flank, Raphinha will compete with Manchester United loanee Marcus Rashford. He becomes the first Englishman to represent Barcelona in four decades, following in the footsteps of Gary Lineker. *Blaugrana* turned to the 27-year-old after missing out on primary target, Nico Williams, who instead extended his deal with Athletic Club.

Though Real Madrid and Barcelona undoubtedly remain the headline acts, Atletico Madrid lurk in the background, ready to disrupt the duopoly.

For the second consecutive season, Atleti have been ultra ambitious in the transfer window, once again spending

over €150m on new signings. Atalanta left-back Matteo Ruggeri was the first to arrive followed by the likes of Alex Baena (Villarreal), Johnny Cardoso (Real Betis), Thiago Almada (Botafogo, after a loan at Lyon), Marc Pubill (Almeria) and David Hancko (Feyenoord). On paper, it's an impressive haul, strengthening not only the starting line-up but also adding significant depth across the squad.

Diego Simeone will be counting on the reinforcements to not only help close the gap from last season when, despite their strong window – signing two of the league's top scorers in Alexander Sorloth and Julian Alvarez – they finished eight points behind Real Madrid and 12 adrift of Barcelona, but also mount a serious title challenge. With the quality they've added, *Los Rojiblancos* should make a genuine push this time around.

Jared Tinslay

Big spenders... Thiago Almada is one of several big signings for Atletico Madrid

WHO'S WHO?

ALAVES
Manager: Eduardo Coudet

ATHLETIC CLUB
Manager: Ernesto Valverde

ATLETICO MADRID
Manager: Diego Simeone

BARCELONA
Manager: Hansi Flick

CELTA VIGO
Manager: Claudio Giraldez

ELCHE
Manager: Eder Sarabia

ESPANYOL
Manager: Manolo Gonzalez

GETAFE
Manager: Jose Bordalas

GIRONA
Manager: Michel

LEVANTE
Manager: Julian Calero

MALLORCA
Manager: Jagoba Arrasate

OSASUNA
Manager: Alessio Lisci

RAYO VALLECANO
Manager: Inigo Perez

REAL BETIS
Manager: Manuel Pellegrini

REAL MADRID
Manager: Xabi Alonso

REAL OVIEDO
Manager: Veljko Paunovic

REAL SOCIEDAD
Manager: Sergio Francisco

SEVILLA
Manager: Matias Almeyda

VALENCIA
Manager: Carlos Corberan

VILLARREAL
Manager: Marcelino

Back in La Liga... Santi Cazorla will lead Real Oviedo into the top flight

OVIEDO'S TOP-FLIGHT RETURN

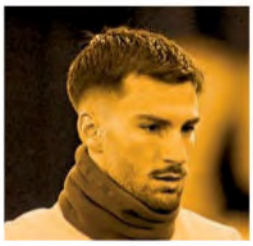
Of the three teams promoted from the Segunda Division, it's little surprise that Real Oviedo are commanding most of the attention. The club from Asturias, nestled in Spain's northwest, return to the top flight after a 24-year absence. Once a regular presence in La Liga, Oviedo's fortunes took a decline at the turn of the century due to financial turmoil. They dropped down the divisions and were rescued from insolvency by their supporters.

Today, the club boasts over 45,000 shareholders spread across more than 125 countries – a testament to its global fanbase and the collective joy sparked by last season's dramatic promotion. This summer has brought some fresh faces to the squad, most notably veteran Venezuela striker Salomon Rondon, who joins on a one-year loan from Mexican side Pachuca. He reunites with long-time friend and former Malaga team-mate Santi Cazorla, who, although approaching 41 years old, has signed a one-year contract extension following his starring role in last season's play-off triumph.

Still, Oviedo fans may have to temper their expectations. Avoiding relegation will be a challenge, and a finish in the bottom three remains a real possibility.

PLAYERS TO WATCH

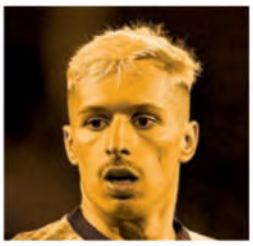
JOAN GARCIA
(Barcelona)
The 24-year-old is Barca's new long-term No.1 – and public enemy No.1 at the RCDE Stadium after making the controversial switch from rivals Espanyol. A product of Espanyol's academy, he had been with *Los Periquitos* since the age of 15.



ALEX BAENA
(Atletico Madrid)
Topped La Liga's assist charts in 2023-24 and, with better finishing from his team-mates, might have done so again last season after creating more chances than any other player. Now has the platform his talent deserves at Atletico.

ALVARO CARRERAS
(Real Madrid)
Madrid's answer to Gerard Pique, having departed at 17 to join Manchester United before returning a few years later. The left-back's winding journey has included loan spells at Preston North End and Granada, plus a permanent stint at Benfica.

ALBERTO MOLEIRO
(Villarreal)
Despite Las Palmas' relegation in 2024-25, the 21-year-old winger stood out, catching Villarreal's eye and prompting a €16m outlay. A skilful dribbler with a relentless work ethic, he's regarded as one of Spanish football's brightest prospects.



BRYAN ZARAGOZA
(Celta Vigo)
The Spanish winger has struggled for minutes at Bayern Munich since joining from Granada in 2024. He featured 28 times on loan at Osasuna last season and finds himself back on loan in La Liga as he looks to rediscover his old form.

Sevilla rebuild... Matias Almeyda is back at the Ramon Sanchez-Pizjuan

SEVILLA SEARCH FOR ANSWERS

Since lifting the Europa League trophy in 2023, Sevilla have been in steady decline. They finished 14th in 2023-24 and narrowly avoided relegation last term, ending up 17th. Beyond a clear lack of confidence and tactical cohesion, their most glaring issue has been turning possession into meaningful attacking moments, too often relying on top scorer Dodi Lukebakio to conjure something from nothing.

Despite their recent struggles, this is still a squad with more than enough quality to be well clear of the relegation zone. That's where new coach Matias Almeyda comes in. A former Sevilla midfielder, the Argentine arrives with a promising managerial pedigree. He led Mexico's Guadalajara to their first league title in 11 years, and guided AEK Athens to an historic Greek domestic double in his debut season – their first in 45 years.

Almeyda won't be expected to deliver silverware; the club's fans first want to see their team return to the top half of the table. What we can expect, however, is a more direct and purposeful style of play. At AEK, Almeyda's system focused on quickly finding the full-backs during the build-up, then looking for runners in behind – a potentially transformative approach for a Sevilla side in search of identity.

> Claudio Giraldez and Inigo Perez represent the current generation of Spanish coaching talent: modern, ambitious and willing to take risks

SPOTLIGHT ON YOUNG COACHES

Last season's surprise packages, Celta Vigo and Rayo Vallecano, finished seventh and eighth respectively; each led by dynamic 37-year-old Spanish coaches tipped for bright futures in the game.

At Celta, Claudio Giraldez stepped up from the B team in March 2024 after the dismissal of Rafa Benitez. A lifelong fan and local native, Giraldez injected the squad with renewed energy and belief, steering them from the brink of relegation to a Europa League spot. His positive approach has won plaudits, all the more impressive considering the Galician club's minimal spending.

Equally exciting have been Rayo Vallecano, under the guidance of Inigo Perez, a former assistant to Andoni Iraola. Expectations were modest at the start of 2024-25, but Rayo's fearless style of play propelled them to surprise Conference League qualification. The capital club has become a neutral's favourite, with Perez's attacking ethos breathing new life into Vallecas.

Both represent the current generation of Spanish coaching talent: modern, ambitious and willing to take risks.

GOING GLOBAL

Perhaps provoked by Serie A's plans to take a game to Australia (see page 28), talk has again been sparked of staging a Spanish top-flight fixture in the US. After La Liga president Javier Tebas re-affirmed his commitment to the proposition, Barca chief Joan Laporta told *CNN*: "It will be a great honour to participate in this event that will be an official game of La Liga, but at the same time will be a big event in the States." Similar proposals were rejected in 2018, but momentum seems to be gathering behind project 2025-26, with talks ongoing around potentially moving December's clash between Villarreal and Barcelona to Miami's Hard Rock Stadium. If approved by the RFEF assembly, permission will be required from CONCACAF, UEFA, FIFA and US Soccer.

Jared Tinslay

Promising coaches ...Inigo Perez & Claudio Giraldez

TYRHYS DOLAN
(Espanyol)
Perhaps taking a cue from Oli McBurnie, Dolan is the latest British forward to test himself in La Liga. The 23-year-old Manchester City academy graduate turned down a contract extension at Blackburn Rovers to join Espanyol.

SANTI CAZORLA
(Real Oviedo)
The two-footed veteran couldn't resist one more stint in La Liga after playing a key role in guiding his boyhood club back to the top flight. Though no longer possessing the stamina of his prime, his technical quality remains.

MIKEL JAUREGIZAR
(Athletic Club)
At just 21, he's established himself as an important member of Athletic's squad and is expected to see even greater opportunities moving forward. A combative tackler with good composure on the ball, he represents the next wave of Basque talent.

THOMAS LEMAR
(Girona)
Joins the Catalan club on loan from Atletico Madrid, hoping to reignite his career. Plagued by a series of injuries in recent seasons, he has struggled to fulfil the promise he showed upon his 2018 transfer from Monaco.

LUCIEN AGOUME
(Sevilla)
The young ball-winning midfielder completed a permanent move to Sevilla from Inter in 2024, but his standout displays last term have already sparked fresh transfer speculation. Clubs will be keeping a close eye on his development.

Fresh faces in Bundesliga dugouts

Bayer Leverkusen, champions in 2023-24, lead the six clubs with new head coaches going into the new German league season

Leipzig-bound...young manager Ole Werner impressed as head coach of Werder Bremen last season

The leadership winds of change continue to swirl as the Bundesliga embarks on its 63rd campaign. For the second consecutive year, no fewer than six clubs – exactly a third of the league fraternity – decided to recalibrate their head coaching options. Whether it is the big guns of Bayer Leverkusen and RB Leipzig, freshly-promoted Cologne, former Bundesliga champions Werder Bremen and Wolfsburg, or the more modest Augsburg, patience is likely to be in short supply.

Last season, three of the six newly-arrived coaches only survived for a few months and the pressure will be especially intense at Leverkusen, where ex-Ajax and Manchester United boss Erik ten Hag faces the unenviable task of filling the void left by the departure to Real Madrid of the inspirational Basque Xabi Alonso.

Even the most ardent Leverkusen supporter will not be expecting a title challenge, the unseating of reigning champions and perennial league favourites Bayern Munich. Alonso's sensational achievements at the BayArena, notably the club's first-ever Bundesliga title in 2023-24 and the DFB-Pokal Cup the same season, placed the bar unfeasibly high. Doubts rightly persist in the Rhineland that Ten Hag, who was hardly a roaring success in his three years at Old Trafford, will maintain anything like those stupendous standards.

Freed from the Old Trafford Theatre of Mayhem, Ten Hag will be hoping to concentrate on what he does best: his meticulous work on the training ground and developing young talent. But will that be enough to keep the *Werkself* competitive? Common sense says not. Much of Leverkusen's attacking brilliance disappeared when *wunderkind* Florian Wirtz signed for Liverpool, and that end-of-an era feeling was further underlined by the loss of two other team mainstays, the Bayern Munich-bound central defender Jonathan Tah and speedy Dutch wing-back Jeremie Frimpong, another addition to the Liverpool ranks. New recruits include goalkeeper Mark Flekken (Brentford), defender Jarell Quansah (Liverpool), attacking midfielder Malik Tillman (PSV) and forwards Christian Kofane (Albacete) and Ibrahim Maza (Hertha Berlin).

New RB Leipzig coach Ole Werner has the same type of perilous terrain to navigate. So disjointed and flat last term, RB failed to qualify for the Champions League for the first time in seven years and the Saxons have a lot of broken pieces to pick up, fix and reassemble. Although Werner was not their first-choice to plot a comeback – the powers-that-be apparently preferred Cesc Fabregas of Como or Crystal Palace manager Oliver Glasner – he may prove

New Bayer Leverkusen boss...Erik ten Hag

to be just what they need. An advocate of brave attacking football, of high pressing and swift transitions, Werner led Werder to a fine eighth-place finish in the Bundesliga last season, the club's best league placing in six years. The signings of wingers Yan Diomande (Leganes) and Johan Bakayoko (PSV) should help the cause.

Nick Bidwell

Leverkusen's loss... Jonathan Tah has joined Bayern

WHO'S WHO?

AUGSBURG
Manager: Sandro Wagner

BAYER LEVERKUSEN
Manager: Erik ten Hag

BAYERN MUNICH
Manager: Vincent Kompany

BORUSSIA DORTMUND
Manager: Niko Kovac

BORUSSIA MONCHENGLADBACH
Manager: Gerardo Seoane

COLOGNE
Manager: Lukas Kwasniok

EINTRACHT FRANKFURT
Manager: Dino Toppmoller

FREIBURG
Manager: Julian Schuster

HAMBURG
Manager: Merlin Polzin

HEIDENHEIM
Manager: Frank Schmidt

HOFFENHEIM
Manager: Christian Ilzer

MAINZ
Manager: Bo Henriksen

RB LEIPZIG
Manager: Ole Werner

ST PAULI
Manager: Alexander Blessin

STUTTGART
Manager: Sebastian Hoeness

UNION BERLIN
Manager: Steffen Baumgart

WERDER BREMEN
Manager: Horst Steffen

WOLFSBURG
Manager: Paul Simonis

Horror injury...Musiala suffered a broken leg v Paris Saint-Germain

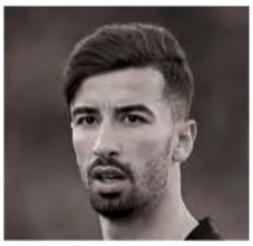
BAYERN'S INJURED STARLET

Bayern Munich boss Vincent Kompany could take the calculated risk of using youthful promise to fill the gap left by Jamal Musiala's long-term absence, perhaps deploying the 19-year-old Paul Wanner, who was on loan at Heidenheim last term, or Lennart Karl, 17, an outrageously gifted youth teamer. A silky purveyor of both goals and assists for Bayern's juniors, Karl was handed his debut in June in a Club World Cup encounter against Auckland City. Another alternative would involve shifting Tom Bischof, recently acquired from Hoffenheim, from his usual box-to-box role to the number ten slot. Bayern's dream solution would be to force through a big-money transfer for Stuttgart's Nick Woltemade, the German revelation of last term.

BORUSSIA DORTMUND'S QUEST FOR CONSISTENCY

A top priority for Dortmund has to be the eradication of the team's bewildering inconsistency in recent times, the disparity between their performances pre and post-Christmas. Last season, for example, they cut two distinct figures, a sequence of sorry displays in the autumn championship, before the springtime rejuvenation

PLAYERS TO WATCH



MOHAMED AMOURA
(Wolfsburg)
Accomplished striker or left-winger blessed with A-grade creativity and heavy-hitting punch in goalscoring mode. Small of stature but incredibly resilient. Several Premier League sides have shown interest in the Algerian.

LUIS DIAZ
(Bayern Munich)
The genial Colombian winger-cum-goalscorer, a recent €75m purchase from Liverpool, could, if all goes to plan, be a godsend for a team in dire need of more attacking variety and better support for talisman Harry Kane.

JOEL CHIMA FUJITA
(St Pauli)
With his irrepressible all-action style and obsessive will-to-win, the 23-year-old Japanese defensive midfielder, recently brought in from Belgian side Sint-Truiden, has the potential to be someting of a cult hero at the Millerntor.

JOHAN MANZAMBI
(Freiburg)
Last season, his first in the first team, the 19-year-old holding midfielder came more and more into his own, blossoming into an outstanding link man between the two penalty areas. Already a senior Switzerland international.

CHRISLAIN MATSIMA
(Augsburg)
On loan from Monaco last term, the towering French centre-back, 23, rarely put a foot wrong. Both a gladiatorial battler and impressive with his distribution, FCA could not wait to sign him to a permanent deal.

Chasing Bayern... Dortmund have high hopes

that fuelled their successful late, late surge for the fourth and final Champions League spot. Head coach Niko Kovac, whose arrival at the helm in February sparked the revival, will be demanding much more application and focus this time around. Secretly, he will want his charges to be Bayern's number one rival.

> A top priority for Dortmund has to be the eradication of the team's bewildering inconsistency

HOW TO REPLACE A TOP-CLASS ATTACK

The naysayers were bound to come running after Eintracht Frankfurt cashed in on a pair of outstanding forwards this year, Omar Marmoush to Manchester City for €75 million in January and, this summer, Hugo Ekitike to Liverpool for €91m, including add-ons. The pair scored 30 goals between them last season and will naturally be missed. Marmoush's mid-season replacement, the French front-man Elye Wahi, started slowly, then faded, though Eintracht should have better luck at the point of attack with the newly-acquired Jonathan Burkardt. The Germany international, who netted 18 goals for Mainz last season, is not only sharp as a tack in the box but also an exceptional team player – as well as a lifelong Eintracht fan. Don't write off the Eagles.

NEW BOYS CHASING SURVIVAL

Hamburg and Cologne, two of the biggest names in German club football and both erstwhile Bundesliga champions, undoubtedly will feel the benefit of the euphoria generated by their substantial fanbases. As long as they start well, quickly getting up to speed in the top flight, they should still be standing next May. Back in the Bundesliga for the first time in seven years, Hamburg used to be serially mismanaged, but have become much more serious of late under director of sport, the former Germany striker and Turkey manager, Stefan Kuntz. Second division champions Cologne have a new head coach in the shape of passionate former Carl Zeiss Jena, Saarbrucken and Paderborn boss Lukas Kwasniok.

Nick Bidwell

Back in the Bundesliga...Hamburg spent seven years in the second tier

PAUL NEBEL
(Mainz)
Earlier this summer, the attacking midfielder starred in Germany Under-21s' run to the final of the European Championship. Bright and technical, he is close to a senior call-up – though also holds Irish citizenship through his grandmother.

RAYAN PHILIPPE
(Hamburg)
Express speed and cool finishing are the two specialities of the Nice-born striker or right-winger. Hopes are high after newly-promoted Hamburg snapped him up for a bargain €2.5m from Eintracht Braunschweig.

MARVIN SCHWABE
(Cologne)
After many years struggling for recognition in Germany, the 30-year-old keeper rebuilt his career in Denmark with Brondby. Pitched up in 2021 at Cologne, where he has earned top marks for his one-on-one stops and leadership qualities.

DANIEL SVENSSON
(Borussia Dortmund)
The Sweden left-back, 23, signed early this year from Danish club Nordsjaelland, is keen to kick off after a fine Club World Cup with the *Schwarz-Gelben*. Calm and disciplined in his defensive duties and full of offensive running.

MALIK TILLMAN
(Bayer Leverkusen)
The dynamic attacking midfielder has inherited the No.10 shirt of Florian Wirtz. Last seen scoring 12 Eredivisie goals on the way to PSV's title win and impressing for the United States in this summer's CONCACAF Gold Cup.

Wide-open title race

Inter and Napoli, Serie A's leading contenders, both have their strengths and weaknesses

Operation rebuild...new Internazionale boss Cristian Chivu barks out instructions from the dugout

Internazionale are arguably the strongest and most consistent Italian club of the past five seasons, during which they have won two league titles (2020-21 and 2023-24) and reached two Champions League finals (2023 and 2025).

Yet Inter's failure to win anything last season, a campaign in which they consistently led the title race and fell at the final hurdle in Europe, seems certain to leave a heavy mark.

New coach Cristian Chivu, a former defender for Romania, Ajax, Roma and Inter, faces a very difficult task to reshape and motivate his squad. That traumatic drubbing at the hands of Paris Saint-Germain left a huge dent in their confidence. The Inter side that had eliminated Bayern Munich and Barcelona in four utterly titanic quarter-final and semi-final ties in March and April were embarrassingly played off the pitch in Munich. Their performance was simply too bad to be true.

Within days of that defeat, Al Hilal announced that Inter coach Simone Inzaghi would be joining them, with it later emerging that the Saudi club had reached an agreement with Inzaghi prior to the Champions League final.

Some critics have argued that perhaps Inzaghi's concentration on the final was compromised by the negotiations with his new club. A more telling factor may have been the physical exhaustion of the Inter squad that had been involved in a do-or-die title battle right up until the last day of the Serie A season, nine days before the final. Their opponents PSG, in contrast, had their domestic league title success wrapped up in early April, almost two months before the final. Did Inter just run out of gas in the end?

Former Italy and Milan coach Arrigo Sacchi argues that both Inter and Napoli, the team that pipped them to the *Scudetto*, should choose their priorities carefully this season in order to maximise their resources.

"Looking at the current situation, I would advise both Napoli and Inter, which are the clubs best equipped to compete for both the Serie A title and the Champions League, to concentrate above all on Serie A," said Sacchi.

As of now, the new season's title contest looks wide open. The holders have undoubtedly been hugely boosted by head coach Antonio Conte's decision, admittedly after a certain amount of doubt, to stay on for a second season.

Yet, they will not have the "advantage" this campaign of playing without the distractions of European competition. Whatever Sacchi recommends, it will be difficult for them to expend all of their physical and mental energy at home and ignore the Champions League – especially after making such a high-profile signing in Kevin De Bruyne.

Much will be expected of the Belgium midfielder after his arrival from Manchester City, while two 26-year-old Dutchmen, winger Noa Lang (ex-PSV) and central defender Sam Beukema (ex-Bologna), could also prove to be useful acquisitions. Combined with the stars of last season's title success – Romelu Lukaku, Scott McTominay, Giovanni Di Lorenzo, et al. – this continues to look like a strong Napoli.

If there is to be a challenge to the top two, it could come from Juventus.

Fired up...Inter captain Lautaro Martinez finished trophyless last season

The record 36-time champions have seen a few false dawns since their last title in 2020, and will not be getting carried away under the understated leadership of head coach Igor Tudor. But in Canada striker Jonathan David, a free transfer from Lille, they have potentially one of the bargains of the summer. More incomings could arrive before deadline day, especially if they can shift some of the squad's deadwood. Never rule out the Old Lady.

Paddy Agnew

Big-name signing... Kevin De Bruyne in pre-season action for champions Napoli

WHO'S WHO?

ATALANTA
Manager: Ivan Juric

BOLOGNA
Manager: Vincenzo Italiano

CAGLIARI
Manager: Fabio Pisacane

COMO
Manager: Cesc Fabregas

CREMONESE
Manager: Davide Nicola

FIORENTINA
Manager: Stefano Pioli

GENOA
Manager: Patrick Vieira

HELLAS VERONA
Manager: Paolo Zanetti

INTERNAZIONALE
Manager: Cristian Chivu

JUVENTUS
Manager: Igor Tudor

LAZIO
Manager: Maurizio Sarri

LECCE
Manager: Eusebio Di Francesco

MILAN
Manager: Massimiliano Allegri

NAPOLI
Manager: Antonio Conte

PARMA
Manager: Carlos Cuesta

PISA
Manager: Alberto Gilardino

ROMA
Manager: Gian Piero Gasperini

SASSUOLO
Manager: Fabio Grosso

TORINO
Manager: Marco Baroni

UDINESE
Manager: Kosta Runjaic

Musical chairs...Gian Piero Gasperini and Maurizio Sarri have both moved to Rome

MUSICAL CHAIRS AMONG THE HEAD COACHES

No fewer than 12 of the 20 Serie A clubs have appointed a new head coach for the upcoming campaign, including Atalanta, Milan, Roma, Fiorentina, Inter, Lazio and Parma. These appointments ask a lot of intriguing questions.

Will Atalanta, deprived of their talismanic head coach Gian Piero Gasperini, maintain the sort of form that has earned them four third-place finishes in the last seven years?

Will Gasperini himself slip into the shoes of an illustrious predecessor at Roma, after taking over from club icon Claudio Ranieri? The latter came out of retirement last season to win 17 games out of 26 and almost put Roma back into the Champions League.

Ranieri, who is still with Roma in an executive role, had replaced Ivan Juric on the Roma bench last November. Just to underline the "musical chairs" nature of coaching appointments, the Croatian, after failing to save Southampton from Premier League relegation, has now taken over from Gasperini at Atalanta.

Elsewhere, will Maurizio Sarri, in his second spell at Lazio, be able to create something from an apparently understrength squad and a club with

PLAYERS TO WATCH

EVAN FERGUSON
(Roma)
The 20-year-old striker has arrived on loan from Brighton with the clear aim of resetting his highly promising career, after falling out of favour with the Seagulls and failing to impress at West Ham. First Irishman to play for Roma.

NICO PAZ
(Como)
Amid all of Como's summer outlay, their most exciting business is keeping hold of the Argentina starlet after his former club Real Madrid opted against utilising their buy-back clause. Ready to kick on after an exciting breakout last season.

CESARE CASADEI
(Torino)
Italy youth team player at all levels from U16 to U21, who moved from Inter to Chelsea for around €15m as a 19-year-old in 2022. Top scorer and Player of the Tournament at the U20 World Cup in 2023 when Italy reached the final.

FEDERICO BERNARDESCHI
(Bologna)
After three years with Toronto FC the ex-Juventus forward is back in Serie A with Bologna, where he will play with fellow Italy international Ciro Immobile. Still only 31, Bernardeschi has a point to prove.

NICCOLO PISILLI
(Roma)
Another member of the Italy side that lost to Uruguay in the 2023 U20 World Cup final. The midfielder broke through into the Roma first team last season, playing in 28 Serie A games, and made his senior *Azzurri* debut in October.

Midfield legends... De Bruyne and Modric will both be in Italy

limited finances? How will Stefano Pioli fare on his return to Fiorentina? And how will Milan do with another returning coach in Massimiliano Allegri, winner of the title with them in 2011 and then five times with Juventus from 2015 to 2019?

THE SERIE A RETIREMENT HOME

In years gone by, Italian football was famed for its ability to elongate players' careers. To some extent, the old recipe is back in vogue, with the eye-catching arrivals of 34-year-old Kevin De Bruyne at champions Napoli and Milan's capture of 39-year-old Croatia legend Luka Modric from Real Madrid.

Both are wonderful players, among the most talented midfielders of their generation, but their arrivals do pose questions. Can Modric, going on 40, still do a job in the top flight – beyond the first hour anyway? Is there a good reason that Pep Guardiola was happy to let De Bruyne depart the Etihad Stadium? Moreover, is this the way to make Serie A one of the world's leading leagues again?

Others will point out that this is a script that has been written before. Like Andrea Pirlo, Zlatan Ibrahimovic or Cristiano Ronaldo before them, one or both of these legendary midfielders could be in the perfect place for their happy ending.

> Italian football was famed for its ability to elongate players' careers. The old recipe is back in vogue with the eye-catching arrivals of Kevin De Bruyne and Luka Modric

WHAT NEXT FOR BOLOGNA?

One of the few coaches staying in post is Vincenzo Italiano at Bologna. It has been a rollercoaster ride for the club, qualifying for the Champions League in 2023-24 only to see that team stripped of its best assets – including then-coach Thiago Motta. Italiano took over and won the club's first major trophy in 51 years, beating Milan 1-0 in the Coppa Italia final. After another busy summer, can they stage another successful rebuild?

COMO DREAMING BIG

Towards the end of July, a story began to circulate on Italian social media to the effect that the great Argentine champion, Lionel Messi, currently with Inter Miami in the MLS, was soon to sign for Serie A club, Como.

Fuelled by the sighting of Messi's wife Antonela Roccuzzo at Como's Sinigaglia stadium, plus the fact that his former Barcelona team-mate Cesc Fabregas is the head coach, the rumour was soon quashed by club president Mirwan Suwarso.

Still, there is no shortage of optimism around the scenic north Italian lakeside club. Over €100 million has been spent this summer on rising talents that will improve a squad that comfortably survived relegation on their Serie A return last season. Plenty of eyes will be drawn to the ambitious project.

Paddy Agnew

Ambitious...Como's Nico Paz celebrates with his team-mates

JUAN CUADRADO
(Pisa)
At the age of 37, the speedy Colombian winger or full-back has signed up for his 17th campaign of Italian football at newly-promoted Pisa. He begins the season on 395 Serie A games – only eight foreign players have played more.

FRANCESCO CAMARDA
(Lecce)
On Milan's books since the age of seven, the 17-year-old has already played ten games in Serie A and four in the Champions League. This season, he has been loaned out to Lecce, where the forward could improve his sizable reputation.

JACOPO FAZZINI
(Fiorentina)
A product of the redoubtable Empoli youth academy, Fazzini signed for powerful Tuscan neighbours Fiorentina in June for around €10m. Under shrewd coach Stefano Pioli, this could be a huge campaign for the former Italy U21 player.

WESLEY FRANCA
(Roma)
Follows in the footsteps of the legendary Cafu by leaving Brazil to play right-back for Roma. The 21-year-old has massive potential, arriving in Rome with two *Selecao* caps and a clutch of trophies won with Flamengo.

KEVIN DE BRUYNE
(Napoli)
All eyes will be on the 34-year-old Belgian. Clearly one of the great talents of his generation, but will he have the desire, motivation and physical strength to lead the reigning Italian champions into the new campaign?

The untouchables

Even PSG's main rivals aren't seriously thinking about usurping them in this season's Ligue 1

Unstoppable...Paris Saint-Germain boss Luis Enrique has turned the club into Europe's best

If Paris Saint-Germain approached last season with uncertainty, that is certainly not the case this time around. This time last year, *Les Parisiens* headed unwillingly into the new campaign Kylian Mbappe-less, only to find that the grass was greener on the other side. But even if manager Luis Enrique was insistent that PSG would emerge stronger following the Real Madrid forward's departure, there was an element of mystery heading into the Ligue 1 campaign and rivals, some of whom had heavily invested to strengthen, sensed that.

Doubts and uncertainties have been replaced by a universally accepted truth: PSG are not only the best in France, they are the best in Europe. Defeat to Chelsea in the Club World Cup final has not changed those perceptions.

The response from rivals is one of submission. Marseille finished second under Roberto De Zerbi last season, but they aren't explicitly targeting higher. "We want to compete with PSG better than we did last season," said the Italian in June.

Third-place finishers Monaco are clearer in their objective. The Principality club have been ambitious in the transfer window, bringing in Paul Pogba, Ansu Fati and Eric Dier, but the target is not to dethrone PSG. "We want to be back in second in Ligue 1," said CEO Thiago Scuro. A fourth consecutive league title, coupled with their newfound European dominance, has knocked the fight out of their rivals. Even arch-enemy Marseille have placed PSG on a pedestal – they are there to be admired as a shining bastion of French football, not challenged.

Rivals' objectives, however, are simply realistic in the context of the financial situation in French football. Marginal gains, a couple of intelligent low-cost recruits can't breach the chasm that has emerged between PSG and the rest of the league.

The league's decision to launch their own channel will, by their own admission, lead to "two difficult years" for clubs. Spending, consequently, is down. At the time of writing, just over €400 million had been spent by Ligue 1 clubs this summer, with PSG accounting for around a quarter, and more than half of the rest coming from simply triggering buy options in last season's loan deals. For comparison, at the same point Premier League clubs had already spent well over €2 billion.

There is a feeling of inertia, of the status quo being perfectly preserved. That feeling is only reinforced by the lack of movement in dugouts across the country. In contrast to last summer, when five of the previous year's top ten – and seven teams overall – changed managers, there have only been two managerial changes during the off-season. Pierre Sage has replaced Will Still at Lens, while Luis Castro, highly rated for his sterling work at Ligue 2 side Dunkerque, is in for Antoine Kombouare at Nantes. Neither side is expected to challenge at the top.

The untouchables... nobody is expected to stop PSG in this year's Ligue 1

PSG waited until August to strengthen

– goalkeeper Lucas Chevalier and defender Illia Zabarnyi joined from Lille and Bournemouth respectively – but the truth is that they can maintain their stranglehold on French football without needing to. External forces keep rivals at bay; the excellent work of Luis Enrique and Luis Campos only grows the gap. PSG have never felt more untouchable.

Luke Entwistle

Ambitious...Monaco have signed some big names to try to close the gap to PSG

WHO'S WHO?

ANGERS
Manager: Alexandre Dujeux

AUXERRE
Manager: Christophe Pelissier

BREST
Manager: Eric Roy

LE HAVRE
Manager: Didier Digard

LENS
Manager: Pierre Sage

LILLE
Manager: Bruno Genesio

LYON
Manager: Paulo Fonseca (Jorge Maciel caretaker)

LORIENT
Manager: Olivier Pantaloni

MARSEILLE
Manager: Roberto De Zerbi

METZ
Manager: Stephane Le Mignan

MONACO
Manager: Adi Hutter

NANTES
Manager: Luis Castro

NICE
Manager: Franck Haise

PARIS FC
Manager: Stephane Gilli

PARIS SAINT-GERMAIN
Manager: Luis Enrique

RENNES
Manager: Habib Beye

STRASBOURG
Manager: Liam Rosenior

TOULOUSE
Manager: Carles Martinez Novell

Sprinkling of stardust...Olivier Giroud is one of the high-profile arrivals, signing for Lille

A SPRINKLING OF STARDUST

Ligue 1 tends to make stars, it doesn't usually welcome them. However, amid the current financial climate, clubs have looked more to the free transfer market, and there have been some intriguing opportunities. Paul Pogba is the biggest name to join France's top flight, signing a two-year deal at Monaco. Ansu Fati has also joined Monaco, on loan from Barcelona, and is already a household name despite only being 22. France's all-time top goalscorer, Olivier Giroud, has made a shock return to Ligue 1 at the age of 38. There is a sprinkling of stardust, and beyond what those players can bring to their individual clubs, they will also bring more eyes to Ligue 1 in general. No wonder Pogba's arrival in particular has been universally welcomed, even by rivals.

PSG'S NOISY NEIGHBOURS

Usually inter-city rivalries are a foreign concept in France, but this season there will be a derby in the capital city. Paris FC will play the role of the noisy neighbours and ones located literally next door to PSG's home, the Parc des Princes.

Purchased by the Arnault Family, who topped *Forbes'* list of richest billionaires in 2024, they have

PLAYERS TO WATCH

PAUL POGBA
(Monaco)
One of the summer's most anticipated transfers sees Pogba return to the professional game. Is he still the world-beater that led France to the World Cup? His fitness issues mean we'll have to wait a little while to find out.

OLIVIER GIROUD
(Lille)
Another World Cup winner returning to France, Giroud has swiftly moved back across the Atlantic from LAFC to Lille. He'll likely struggle to replicate Jonathan David's figures, but he is an interesting and experienced option.

IGOR PAIXAO
(Marseille)
Outside of PSG, Paixao is Ligue 1's most expensive summer arrival at the time of writing. Marseille beat off stern competition to land the Brazilian forward, who was highly rated by Arne Slot during their time together at Feyenoord.

OUSMANE DEMBELE
(Paris Saint-Germain)
It will be fascinating to see whether he can replicate his goalscoring form from last season, which leaves him as the outstanding candidate to win the Ballon d'Or. Dembele will be keen to prove that it wasn't a flash-in-the-pan.

BADREDINE BOUANANI
(Nice)
The winger has always been blessed with technical ability, but has consistently lacked decision-making and end product. He gave indications last season that he was working on those weaknesses and ready to deliver on his promise.

Noisy neighbours... Paris FC supporters watch their team on the road to promotion

the capacity to reshape the footballing landscape, not just in Paris but in France more generally.

Paris FC are building for the long term, but their transfer dealings are a recognition that there are short-term objectives to achieve. Saint-Etienne, in a comparable situation last season, put the cart before the horse, signing exciting players like Lucas Stassin and Zuriko Davitashvili, but without bringing in experience. *Les Verts* paid for that, immediately returning to Ligue 2. In a bid to avoid a similar fate, Moses Simon and Thibault De Smet have already arrived at PFC bringing with them a wealth of top-flight experience. There is a platform to build on and, while PSG can rest easy for now, there can be no doubt that there is a new challenger on their doorstep.

RENNES REDEMPTION?

Two consecutive finishes outside the top half of the table in Ligue 1 have been significantly below expectations and unaligned with Rennes' significant spending. The sporting director has been changed (again) and a squad overhaul is underway, with many of last season's flops shown the door. Valentin Rongier and European Under-21 Championship standout star Quentin Merlin have arrived, both coming from Marseille, as Rennes continue their strategy of sweeping up Ligue 1's tried-and-tested. It had been a recipe for success until recent times, and, with some promising academy prospects (Djaoui Cisse, Mohamed Kader Meite and Jeremy Jacquet – the latter linked with Arsenal) establishing themselves, there is optimism that a corner has been turned.

The major question mark surrounds the manager, the unproven Habib Beye. The Senegalese, a former right-back at Marseille, Newcastle and Aston Villa, was an upgrade on Jorge Sampaoli but can he satisfy the club's European objectives?

> Usually inter-city rivalries are a foreign concept in France, but this season there will be a derby in the capital city with Paris FC playing the role of the noisy neighbours

OL IN LIGUE 1, BUT AT WHAT COST?

Lyon's administrative relegation was a seismic shock. Their appeal against the DNCG's decision was successful and Paulo Fonseca's side have been reinstated. However, a period of austerity has now been introduced by new club president, Michele Kang. It is much needed, but it does hamper their ambitions. The most valuable assets – Malick Fofana, Georges Mikautadze, and captain Corentin Tolisso – have been linked with exits, while Rayan Cherki, Lucas Perri and Jordan Veretout have already left. OL are unable to resist approaches, and significant funds won't be available to replace them. Any form of European football, given their current predicament, would be seen as a big achievement.

Either way, Fonseca won't be in the dugout until September. The Portuguese coach was handed a lengthy ban after confronting a referee at the end of last season, so in the meantime his assistant Jorge Maciel will serve as caretaker.

Luke Entwistle

Suspended...Lyon boss Paulo Fonseca was suspended for this confrontation

MATTHIS ABLINE
(Nantes)
A lethal finisher, capable of playing centrally or out wide, Abline made Rennes' decision to sell him to Nantes in July 2024 look silly. He feasted on scraps to net nine goals in Ligue 1, and has had Premier League sides tracking his progress.

DJAOUI CISSE
(Rennes)
Having broken through at the end of last season, the deep-lying midfielder went from strength to strength for France at this summer's Euro U21s. He'll now look to be an integral part of the anticipated revival at formative club, Rennes.

KENDRY PAEZ
(Strasbourg)
His stellar performances in South America earned him comparisons to Lionel Messi and Neymar. Still a relative unknown to European audiences, the Chelsea loanee will hope to live up to the hype while on loan at Strasbourg.

MATIAS FERNANDEZ-PARDO
(Lille)
In the absence of Edon Zhegrova, out for much of the season through injury, it was Fernandez-Pardo who provided the trickery for Lille last season. The Hazard-esque winger is LOSC's latest maverick.

MIKA BIERETH
(Monaco)
The former Arsenal man netted three consecutive hat-tricks in his first three home games in Ligue 1 following his January move from Sturm Graz. He ended the season with 13 league goals and, deservedly, his first caps for Denmark.

Porto reset again

Club president Andre Villas-Boas prepared to spend big to bridge the gap to their Lisbon rivals

The history of Portuguese football over the last 40 years is inextricably intertwined with the rise and domination of FC Porto under the stewardship of their former president, the late Jorge Nuno Pinto da Costa. However, the club has mimicked a story as old as human civilisation itself of a prevailing empire that failed to move with the times and fell into decadence.

When Andre Villas-Boas beat the octogenarian Pinto da Costa in a landslide victory to become the new club president, it heralded renewed hope and a fresh start. But a disastrous season saw the Dragons fall even further behind Lisbon rivals Benfica and Sporting, in addition to sullying their proud international record with an embarrassing European campaign.

Ahead of his second season at the helm, Villas-Boas knows the demanding supporters will not tolerate another failure. Although 2024-25 was wholly forgettable on the pitch, the former coach worked hard behind the scenes to remedy the administrative malaise that had seen Porto bleed money and fall foul of UEFA's financial fair play rules, inhibiting them from moving freely in the transfer market over several windows. Restructuring the debt, negotiating new sponsorship contracts, and the lucrative winter sales of Nico Gonzalez to Manchester City and Wenderson Galeno to Al Ahli suddenly opened up big possibilities for Porto.

"We are set to have a record transfer market in our club's history," said AVB upon the appointment of new coach Francesco Farioli. The bombastic phrase was criticised in the Portuguese media, given that it shifted the focus of a ceremony organised to introduce the former Nice and Ajax manager away from the new Italian coach. Villas-Boas was no doubt keen to show Porto supporters that they should not lose faith in his leadership after two botched managerial appointments (Vitor Bruno and Martin Anselmi) in his first season. Turning to Farioli, he said: "We will give you all you need to achieve success; that is our commitment. We will renew the squad with players that give their heart and soul for Porto. I'm sure you'll be an absolute success."

The subsequent weeks proved those were not empty promises. Midfielders Victor Froholdt and Gabri Veiga, winger Borja Sainz, central defenders Dominik Prpic and Jan Bednarek, right-back Alberto Costa and striker Luuk de Jong were all signed, as well as purchasing the remaining percentage of Samu Aghehowa's ownership from Atletico Madrid, and turning the loan deal of centre-back Nehuen Perez into a permanent move. With a month of the summer transfer window still to go, Porto had splashed out over €90 million – a staggering sum by Portuguese standards – in a bid to strengthen their squad.

The early indications have been promising, with 19-year-old all-action Danish enforcer Froholdt in particular looking a gem in pre-season. Villas-Boas will be desperate to maintain the momentum. Porto also started last season by reeling off a string of impressive results and full of hope before the wheels fell off.

WORLDY WONDERKIDS

Even given Portugal's tremendous record of producing hugely talented footballers, last season was unusual

PLAYERS TO WATCH

VICTOR FROHOLDT
(Porto)
The Primeira Liga was dominated by a player called Viktor for the last two years and another Nordic footballer by a similar name may well follow suit. At just 19, the all-action Denmark midfielder has immediately become a favourite at the Estadio do Dragao.

RICHARD RIOS
(Benfica)
Benfica won a tug-of-war with Italian giants Roma, splashing out €27m to land the 25-year-old Colombia midfielder who shone so brightly for Palmeiras and his national team. If he adapts to Europe, he'll be a key figure for the Eagles.

GABRIEL SILVA
(Santa Clara)
A sprint in Santa Clara's match against Famalicao last season clocked Gabriel Silva as the fastest player in world football, reaching 40km/h. But the Brazilian has far more to his game than pace, and this season has the chance to showcase his ability in Europe.

Another rebuild... new Porto coach Francesco Farioli

Sporting's wonderkid winger...Portugal star Geovany Quenda will join Chelsea next summer

in that two outrageously gifted players made themselves first-team regulars at Sporting and Porto at just 17 years of age. Sporting's Geovany Quenda was so impressive in the first half of the season that Chelsea shelled out over €50m to sign the Guinea-Bissau-born winger. The deal sees Quenda remain in Lisbon on loan for an additional season.

Rodrigo Mora's explosive impact at Porto was just as impressive. Despite the team's struggles, Mora scored 11 goals and provided four assists and became the fulcrum around which Porto's attacking game was based. As two generational talents, it would be a surprise if they do not develop further – with a place in the Portugal squad to compete in next summer's World Cup beckoning.

> "We are set to have a record transfer market in our club's history…We will renew the squad with players that give their heart and soul for Porto"
>
> Porto president Andre Villas-Boas

SPORTING'S RE-BUILD

Sporting have won the Portuguese league title three times in the past five years. Before the arrival of coach Ruben Amorim, the Lions had won it only three times in the previous four decades, and last season's triumph signalled the club's first back-to-back titles in 71 years. The Lisbon club did well to overcome Amorim's shock departure for Manchester United a third of the way through last season to complete the double, but, once again, one individual took centre stage and cannot be disassociated from the success. Viktor Gyokeres scored a barely believable 54 goals in 52 games in all competitions.

Now, without either their inspirational manager or prolific goal-getter, Sporting have resisted the temptation to dive head first into the transfer market. Yes, they have signed Colombian Luis Suarez from Almeria as Gyokeres' replacement, but they've still spent less than title rivals Porto and Benfica despite the club's bulging coffers thanks to Champions League cash and big-money sales. With changes to the playing staff kept to a minimum, continuity is the chosen strategy as the Lions aim to consolidate what has been a rare spell at the top of the Portuguese football tree.

STABILITY A NOVEL APPROACH FOR PORTUGAL'S MIDDLE CLASS

Halfway through the transfer window, Estrela da Amadora had brought in 17 new signings and said goodbye to 12 players from last season. At Nacional da Madeira the incoming/outgoing numbers were 16/12 and at AVS 10/14 in early August.

These numbers are not unusual among Portugal's middling clubs, which makes what is happening at Santa Clara, Estoril and Casa Pia all the more interesting. They are three of only four clubs in the entire top flight who ended last season with the same manager they started it with. The emphasis on stability has extended to the new season, with the trio of clubs retaining their manager and undergoing only nominal changes to their squads. It will be fascinating to see whether what on the face of it is a far more sustainable strategy is rewarded over the *Football Manager* approach that is so commonplace in the Primeira Liga.

Tom Kundert

Class of 2010 back in session

Feyenoord and Ajax will be led by members of the Netherlands' 2010 World Cup squad as they look to knock PSV off their perch

Reigning Dutch champions PSV are set to have their primacy challenged by two men who played in the 2010 World Cup final. The question is, which one will be the most successful – John Heitinga on his return to Ajax, or Robin van Persie in his first full season at the helm of Feyenoord?

Heitinga and Van Persie are the figureheads of a generation that, so far, has failed to make an impact in club football since their playing days ended. Joris Mathijsen (sacked as technical director at ADO Den Haag), and Dirk Kuyt (trying to restore his career at second-tier Dordrecht after relegation with Beerschot in Belgium) have both been unsuccessful. Mark van Bommel, though a champion with Antwerp, was sacked by both PSV and Wolfsburg, while the likes of Wesley Sneijder, Rafael van der Vaart and Arjen Robben are still yet to tread the waters of senior management. Of the 2010 World Cup squad, only Giovanni van Bronckhorst, recently appointed as Arne Slot's assistant at Liverpool, can boast of a decent track record.

And now the verdict is out on Van Persie and Heitinga, who will work in totally different circumstances.

Arguably, Heitinga has the toughest job. First, he has to convince his own board, given that he wasn't their first choice. The Ajax decision-makers had hoped to persuade Erik ten Hag to return, but the former Manchester United boss instead opted to join Bundesliga giants Bayer Leverkusen.

This is Heitinga's second spell in charge of the Amsterdammers, having taken over as interim head coach after Alfred Schreuder was sacked in January 2023, and he had hoped to get the job permanently at the time. But the board ultimately decided that he wasn't the right man. Instead, he worked as an assistant coach, firstly with his old manager David Moyes at West Ham United and then last year at Slot's Liverpool.

Heitinga is also hindered by the legacy of the disastrous Sven Mislintat era at the Johan Cruyff Arena. The former technical director left the Amsterdam club stuck with an abundance of expensive players, meaning that Ajax still have to sell before they can buy.

PLAYERS TO WATCH

KEES SMIT
(AZ)
Attacking midfielder who was the star of the Netherlands' Under-19 team that won the Euros this summer. Technically gifted and able to score goals, he already showed his class last season with a marvellous goal against Fenerbahce.

IVAN PERISIC
(PSV)
Made an immediate impact after joining from Hajduk Split last season and still going strong at 36. Mostly used as a right-winger and part of the reason why Johan Bakayoko was allowed to move to RB Leipzig. His experience is vital on the big European nights.

RAUL MORO
(Ajax)
The Spain Under-21 winger played in the academies of both Barcelona and Lazio before impressing with Real Valladolid last season. A stocky and speedy dribbler, comfortable on either wing, who can create havoc in opposition defences.

Last but not least, he has to try to restore Ajax's traditional style. Under former coach Francesco Farioli, a fresh start was made in terms of results, which almost led to winning the Eredivisie title, but the Italian was criticised for his unattractive defensive football. Heitinga, then, not only has to compete for the title but do it playing *Totaalvoetbal*.

Over in Rotterdam, Van Persie at least has some credit in the bank. After returning from Heerenveen at the end of last season, he remained unbeaten in his first nine matches but ultmately couldn't clinch an automatic Champions League ticket. His aim this time is nothing less than the league title, and therefore the ex-Arsenal and Manchester United striker will

Tough task...John Heitinga faces a big job at Ajax

First full season...Robin van Persie was appointed by Feyenoord in February

face two big issues. Can he help Sem Steijn, last year's Eredivisie top scorer at Twente, reach the next level? And how will he deal with the departure of key defender David Hancko to Atletico Madrid?

Van Persie may have the advantage for now, but things can rapidly change in the unpredictable Eredivisie.

PSV'S GOALSCORING DEFICIT

PSV scored 103 goals last season, with over a third of them coming from Luuk de Jong (14), Malik Tillman (12) and Noa Lang (11). All three players have left this summer: Tillman to Bayer Leverkusen, Lang to Napoli and De Jong to Porto. In addition, winger Johan Bakayoko has moved to RB Leipzig – which begs the question, can PSV cope with the loss of their forwards?

So far, coach Peter Bosz doesn't seem worried. As well as the evergreen Ivan Perisic and new €15.8m winger Ruben van Bommel (son of Mark), he is placing great faith in newcomer Alassane Plea. The 32-year-old French forward, who has joined from Borussia Monchengladbach, has one cap for *Les Bleus* and over 100 career goals to his name. However, if the trio fail to click or the signings don't hit the ground running then the 61-year-old coach may have a problem.

> John Heitinga and Robin van Persie are the figureheads of a generation that, so far, has failed to make an impact in club football since their playing days ended

CAN THE EAGLES GO AGAIN?

In his maiden season in charge of Go Ahead Eagles, Paul Simonis won the Dutch Cup, beating AZ on penalties in a dramatic final, to earn a Europa League ticket. It was the Deventer club's biggest prize in 60 years with the head coach regarded as the architect.

Initially, the 40-year-old resisted the overtures of other clubs and renewed his contract, but an offer from Bundesliga side Wolfsburg was one that he couldn't resist.

New coach Melvin Boel, formerly of second division Dordrecht, now faces the difficult task of continuing Simonis' success. At least Boel, who was coach of Feyenoord's Under-21s in the Arne Slot era, has not lost many of the players from last season's historic success.

EURO UNDER-19 STARLETS

The Eredivisie is known for developing talent, but how many of the stars that won the European U19 Championship in Romania this summer will make their breakthroughs? Full-back Givairo Read (Feyenoord) and attacking midfielder Kees Smit (AZ) burst onto the scene last season, and likely to follow them this campaign is forward Don-Angelo Konadu (Ajax), and midfielders Elijah Dijkstra (AZ) and Tygo Land (PSV). Remember the names.

Klaas-Jan Droppert

BEST OF THE REST

The teams, coaches and players beyond Europe's biggest leagues that we'll be keeping an eye on during the 2025-26 campaign

BELGIUM

CLUB BRUGGE AND UNION SAINT-GILLOISE SET TO BATTLE FOR TITLE

After three seasons back in the top flight, Union Saint-Gilloise won their first title since 1935 in May, an historic achievement based on data-driven player recruitment, smart management and an unbeaten streak in the season-ending play-offs.

Each and every season, the club from the Dudenpark has succeeded in reinventing itself after the sale of its best players. The model of buying low and selling high is instrumental to the operations of Union, which has excelled where most Belgian top-flight clubs have fallen short – running a club shrewdly but with common sense.

This summer, Union sold Franjo Ivanovic for a club record €22.8 million – excluding bonuses – to Portuguese giants Benfica. Captain Anthony Moris, Noah Sadiki, Mohamed Amoura and Koki Machida were also among the outgoing players. They reinforced their squad with goalkeeper Kjell Scherpen from Brighton & Hove Albion, midfielder Adem Zorgane from Charleroi and Austrian winger Raul Florucz from Olimpija Ljubljana – with the latter already making a good impression.

Once again, the club is confident that they can compete this campaign. They perhaps best reflect the reality of the Belgian league, a feeder competition where player turnover is substantial.

ABOVE: Belgian Super Cup...Brugge beat Union 2-1 in the season's curtain-raiser

Record sale...Jashiri was the Player and Young Player of the Season in 2024-25

Their strongest challenge is likely to come from Club Brugge, another club that has mastered the art of player trading. In August, the club received €36m and a potential €3m in bonuses from Ardon Jashari's move to Milan. They had acquired the Switzerland midfielder, who impressed in both the Belgian league and the Champions League, for €6m from Luzern just a year ago. He ranks as the most expensive sale in Belgian football history ahead of Igor Thiago, sold by Brugge to Brentford for €37m, and Charles De Ketelaere, a Brugge youth product who moved for €35m to Milan.

That transfer revenue – topping €80m this summer alone – and the income from consecutive seasons in the Champions League have propelled Brugge to a position of dominance in Belgium. At the time of writing they have spent more money than anyone else in the league while also making more than €50m in transfer profit. Incoming players include midfielders Aleksandar Stankovic (Internazionale) and Ludovits Reis (Hamburg), winger Carlos Forbs (Ajax) and striker Nicolo Tresoldi (Hannover).

The recent rise of Union and the decade-long success of Brugge cannot paper over the cracks of a league and club landscape in decline: a congested calendar, dwindling broadcast revenue, unchecked foreign owners, high wage-to-revenue ratio, multiple club ownership and mounting losses are but some of the problems. Too few Belgian clubs have a good youth academy and mediocre players populate the squads, which does not benefit the quality of play. That was illustrated by the exit of both Anderlecht and Charleroi in the Europa League and Conference League qualifiers respectively against modest opponents from Sweden.

Resultantly, it is left to Brugge and Union to maintain Belgium's high coefficient in Europe, but even so, that's perhaps too little for a country that boasted an elite national team in recent years and where the reigning champions lead by example.

Samindra Kunti

KOCAELISPOR BACK IN THE BIG TIME

Just a decade after playing in Turkey's amateur divisions, Kocaelispor return to the Super Lig for the first time since 2008-09.

Based in the coastal city of Izmit, some 100km east of Istanbul, Kocaelispor were a fixture in the top flight for much of the 1980s and 1990s – narrowly missing out on the league title in 1992-93.

Twice winners of the Turkish Cup, the latter triumph of 2002 remains deeply symbolic for the people of Izmit, which was devastated in 1999 by an earthquake that left 500,000 homeless. It helped forge an unbreakable bond with their fanbase; even at their lowest ebb in the fifth tier, Kocaelispor could still attract crowds of 20,000 for some matches. Now their loyalty will be rewarded with league visits from the likes of Besiktas, Fenerbahce and Galatasaray to the new Kocaeli Stadium, first opened in 2018.

Back in the big time... the Kocaeli Stadium will host top-flight football for the first time

They will, though, begin the season without promotion-winning coach Ismet Tasdemir, who has curiously swapped places at Gaziantep with Kocaelispor's new coach Selcuk Inan.

However, influential wingers Ogulcan Caglayan and Ryan Mendes – who scored a combined 33 league goals last season – both remain. They are joined by the headline additions of Croatia striker Bruno Petkovic and Mali international left-back Massadio Haidara, who both played in last season's Champions League for Dinamo Zagreb and Brest respectively. Meanwhile, winger Dan Agyei impressed in England's League One with Leyton Orient, while ex-Juventus youngster Joseph Nonge – a Belgium Under-21 international – could also prove an interesting addition to midfield.

Kocaelispor's last Super Lig campaign ended in being immediately relegated following winning the second division. Fans will be hoping history doesn't repeat itself.

James Kelly

MOUKOKO AIMING FOR COPENHAGEN REBIRTH

Once regarded as one of the most exciting young talents in world football, Germany striker Youssoufa Moukoko is attempting to rebuild his career with Danish champions Copenhagen.

Flick through the history books of the Champions League, UEFA Youth League, the Bundesliga, Borussia Dortmund and the Germany national team, and you will see Moukoko's name crop up regularly among the youngest goalscorers and appearance-makers. But it has been a testing period for the young striker who turns 21 in November. Following his sensational breakthrough as a teenage tyro, he has since failed to deliver on his early promise and, after returning from an unsuccessful season-long loan spell at Nice, which featured just two goals in 11 appearances, he was sold to Copenhagen for €5m in July.

It has been a busy window for the club from Denmark's capital, who began the summer by cashing in on teenage midfielder Victor Froholdt to Porto for €20m. Much of that has been reinvested, making them Denmark's biggest spenders of the season by far.

Copenhagen rebirth... Moukoko in action for his new club

With Denmark international striker Andreas Cornelius and Moukoko's former Dortmund team-mate Thomas Delaney, there is plenty of experience in the changing room for Moukoko to learn from. Away from the spotlight of Germany – he was part of the country's 2022 World Cup squad – he could recover the confidence and the form that made him such a hot property, rather than becoming another one of football's wasted wonderkids.

Jamie Evans

HERO'S RETURN FOR TIERNEY

Kieran Tierney's second Celtic debut, at home to St Mirren on the first day of the Scottish Premiership season, with a standing ovation from 60,000 fans, endorsed the 28-year-old's decision to return after six years at Arsenal.

Celtic received £25 million for Tierney in 2019 and, six years later, he returned as a free agent after turning down English and European suitors, including Bayer Leverkusen in Germany.

"I thought it was now or never, in terms of coming back to Celtic," Tierney admitted. "If I hadn't come back now, and signed somewhere else, I wouldn't want to come back at 33, when I had slowed down. I am in a good place just now. I am still young and feel I have lot to achieve and a lot to give."

Unsurprisingly, Celtic begin the new season as strong favourites to defend their crown – and Tierney's experience will be vital in that.

"I learned a lot at Arsenal and the loan at Real Sociedad. I will definitely try to pass that onto the younger boys at Celtic – in the way Scott Brown, Charlie Mulgew and Mikael Lustig did with me in my first spell."

Returning hero ...Kieran Tierney

Celtic manager Brendan Rodgers made it clear that Tierney would "earn a lot more money" playing in England or Europe and the former Leicester City coach played an integral role in Tierney's return. "The manager always kept in touch with me. He texts me in the good times and the bad, throughout my career. I loved my time working under him. We were successful and he got the best out of me."

Tierney won eight trophies in his first spell at Celtic, including four league titles, and looks set to add to that trophy haul. "You don't come home at 28 and think about going elsewhere again," he said. "I've signed a long-term deal and I see myself being here for the rest of my career."

Phil Gordon

SCOTLAND

PRESSURE ON MARTIN AT RANGERS

New Rangers manager Russell Martin needs no reminding of the enormity of the job he faces in Glasgow. Taking an axe to the established order is no task for the faint-hearted, and the former Swansea City and Southampton boss will be well aware of the recent Premiership supremacy of cross-town rivals Celtic, champions 13 times in the last 14 years.

Rangers' solitary triumph in that period – under Steven Gerrard in 2020-21 – continues to gnaw away at the psyche of the Ibrox faithful and already a portion of them are targeting Martin, in their eyes the wrong appointment. The critics may have felt vindicated after the club began the new season with underwhelming draws against Motherwell and Dundee.

While Martin, intelligent and strong minded, was deservedly lauded for winning promotion to the English top flight with Southampton in 2023-24, his overall legacy at the helm of the Saints turned out to be a tainted one. He was sacked just a few months into his inaugural stint as a Premier League manager after claiming just one win in 16 games. His refusal to compromise on his principles and playing style may well have been a major factor behind his downfall, but that approach could actually benefit him in Scotland.

New Rangers boss ...Russell Martin

Of course, he will require time to turn things around at Ibrox. Rangers finished last season a whopping 17 points behind Celtic and a raft of new signings have to be incorporated – including Tottenham Hotspur starlet Mikey Moore. With new owners at the club – a US consortium led by healthcare entrepreneur Andrew Cavenagh and the investment arm of the San Francisco 49ers American football franchise – Martin is under pressure to deliver improvement fast.

Nick Bidwell

SCOTLAND

FALKIRK'S TOP-FLIGHT RETURN

Following on from brilliant back-to-back promotions, Falkirk are embarking on their first Scottish Premiership campaign in 15 years.

Having recorded an unbeaten league season in League One in 2023-24, the Bairns followed that up by overcoming a late wobble to claim last season's Championship title on the final day of the season.

Head coach John McGlynn has been named PFA Scotland Manager of the Year for the past two years, bringing him within reach of a record three wins. Given Falkirk's recent rise, he has seen little need to overhaul his squad.

Six of the starting XI in the opening day 2-2 draw with Dundee United also played under McGlynn in League One, including last year's Championship Player of the Year Calvin Miller.

The only major additions are goalkeeper Scott Bain and striker Brian Graham, who scored 21 goals last season for second-tier Partick Thistle. Aged 33 and 37, the pair bring valuable experience to a squad that has otherwise only been enhanced by youngsters Henry Cartwright and Lewis Neilson, on loan from Leicester City and Hearts respectively.

One of the big stories surrounding Falkirk's season concerns Scott Arfield. The 36-year-old midfielder returned to his first club in February, providing a crucial hand in getting them back to the top flight. The Canada international was part of the Falkirk side relegated from the Premiership in 2010. If the club can avoid a similar fate this campaign, it will have been a successful season.

James Kelly

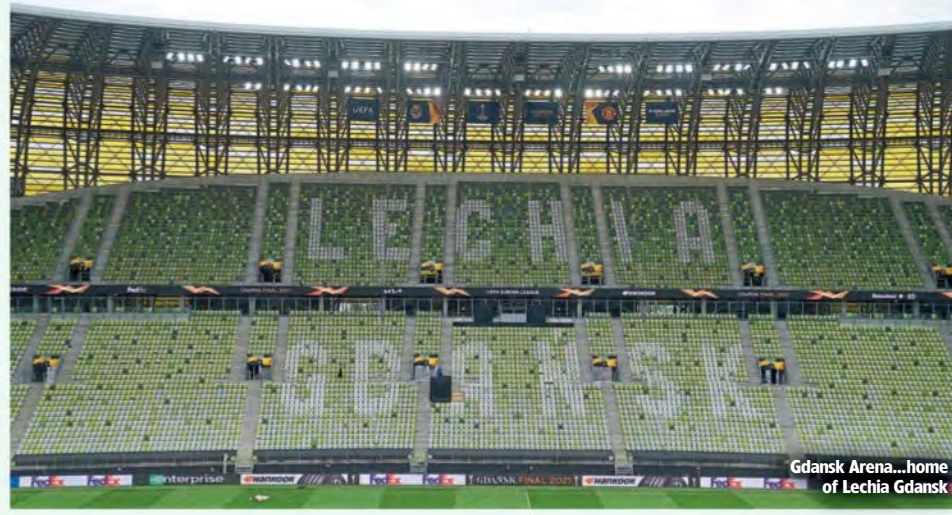
CARVER AND LECHIA GDANSK FACE DAUNTING CHALLENGE

Lechia Gdansk are simultaneously a club with huge potential and also the biggest unknown in Polish football. The two-time Polish Cup winners (1983 and 2019) have one of the most beautiful stadiums in Europe and a large fanbase, which includes Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk and President Karol Nawrocki. Last year, they returned to the top flight, but have endured a bumpy ride since then.

Finding themselves in the relegation zone in December, their English technical director Kevin Blackwell turned to John Carver, then assistant to Scotland manager Steve Clarke, to come in as Lechia's head coach until the end of the season.

After a positive start under Carver, beating relegation rivals Slask Wroclaw 1-0, they were struck with a suspension of their league licence from the Polish FA for failing to settle outstanding debts. Ekstraklasa SA, the league's managing company, gave the club a loan to prevent them from expulsion from the competition, but this was only a temporary solution.

Lechia were allowed to resume and survived relegation under Carver. Before every league match, the former Newcastle United assistant coach told his players that every game was a final. After securing a 14th-place finish, six points and two places clear of the relegation zone, he said: "This is definitely one of the greatest achievements of my career".



Gdansk Arena...home of Lechia Gdansk

But that was not the end of the drama. Before the start of the new season, Lechia were again denied a licence to play in the Ekstraklasa, but after securing financial support the Polish FA finally granted Lechia the requisite licence – but with a five-point deduction for 2025-26.

Former Scotland assistant...John Carver

The 60-year-old Carver has embraced the challenge, signing a new three-year contract. If keeping Lechia in the Ekstraklasa last season was one of the best achievements of his career, then keeping them up again this time will surely supersede it.

Dariusz Kurowski

FRESH HOPE FOR METALIST-1925 KHARKIV

Every day at 9am local time, all of Ukraine stops for a minute's silence to honour and remember the victims of Russian aggression. It was amid a similar atmosphere that the new season of the Ukrainian Premier League began, with the symbolic first kick of each game taken by a wounded soldier or officer.

Naturally, in such conditions, football is far from the most important thing. Yet Ukrainian clubs have continued to play on, even those that were forced to leave their cities. This season, refugees like Shakhtar Donetsk and Zorya Luhansk have been joined by Metalist-1925 Kharkiv, who return to the top flight after a year's absence.

Since the start of the war the club from the city of a million people, located just 26km from the Russian border, has suffered more than most. For more than 1,250 days, Kharkiv has been subjected to merciless attacks from cruise missiles and drones.

After Russia destroyed the port infrastructure in the Odessa region, Metalist-1925's main investor, AES, was forced to cease funding the club.

The club was saved by entrepreneur Volodymyr Nosov, the owner of one of the largest crypto exchanges in Europe, WhiteBit. The 36-year-old, who was born in Kharkiv, said: "The return of Metalist-1925 to the UPL is a very significant event for our club, fans and all of Kharkiv. In the conditions of war, when our city takes a blow every day, this achievement has become another symbol of invincibility and fortitude".

Metalist-1925... an amputee kicks a ball outside Metalist's stadium in Kharkiv

With Nosov's backing, Metalist-1925's transfer budget is one of the biggest in the league and they have been the most active of all the Ukrainian clubs in the summer market thus far. Ukraine internationals Oleksandr Martynyuk and Ivan Kalyuzhny have arrived, as well as former Dynamo Kyiv players Artem Shabanov and Denys Antyukh, with ex-Croatia international Mladen Bartulovic – who has spent the majority of his playing and coaching career in Ukraine – appointed as head coach.

During the war, Metalist-1925 found refuge in the suburbs of Kyiv, the village of Shchaslyve, and will play home games this season in Zhytomyr, located 139km from Ukraine's capital. "Everyone in the club dreams of returning to Kharkiv, but unfortunately no one knows when this will happen," said Bartulovic. "But we know that the residents of Kharkiv, no matter where in the world they are, will definitely be with us."

Oleg Zadernovsky

SAMPDORIA'S STAY OF EXECUTION

Sampdoria have made sweeping changes this summer on and off the pitch as they seek to put the worst season in their 79-year history behind them.

Only an extraordinary set of circumstances prevented the once-proud club, which boasted stars of the calibre of Gianluca Vialli, Roberto Mancini and Ruud Gullit, from dropping into Italian football's third tier for the first time.

Relegated from Serie A in 2023, Sampdoria were widely expected to challenge for promotion last season. Instead, they finished in the automatic relegation places following a disastrous campaign in which they won only eight of their 38 Serie B matches. Three head coaches, including the legendary Italy midfielder Andrea Pirlo, were sacked and nearly 40 different players selected as they tried to arrest the slide.

It appeared to be an almighty fall from grace for a club that won the *Scudetto* in 1991, reached a European Cup final and lifted seven trophies during the 1980s and '90s, including the European Cup Winners' Cup.

But then came an unexpected reprieve. A points deduction for rivals Brescia for financial irregularities saw them relegated to Serie C instead and handed Sampdoria a lifeline.

In June, coaches Alberico Evani and Attilio Lombardo – legendary players during the glory years – steered the club to safety by winning a relegation play-off against Salernitana, though it was far from straightforward.

The two-legged tie was delayed for several weeks while Brescia tried to have their points deduction overturned. After the first leg, which Sampdoria won 2-0, an outbreak of food poisoning in the Salernitana camp prompted a further 48-hour postponement of the return fixture.

When the second leg in Salerno was marred by crowd trouble, the match had to be abandoned and Sampdoria were awarded a 3-0 victory.

Embarking on the 2025-26 season, club president Matteo Manfredi heads a newly-appointed board of directors as Samp look to turn things around and get back to where they feel they belong – in Serie A. A new head coach, the ex-Celtic midfielder Massimo Donati, is in place and a major overhaul of the squad has been necessary – in the last two transfer windows, Sampdoria signed 27 players, including 16 on loan, and ended last season with 19 players out of contract.

Greg Whelan

Proudly supported ...Sampdoria had the highest attendance in Serie B last season

GERMANY

ARMINIA BIELEFELD AIMING BIG

Welcome to Arminia Bielefeld, the yo-yo club of the top three German divisions which now is the most unlikely of football boomtowns, still basking in the glow of their magical efforts of last season: the third division title and logic-defying run to the German Cup final.

Not so long ago, this was a club on the slide: relegated from the Bundesliga in 2022, falling into the third tier the following season and then narrowly avoiding another demotion. So what a shock it was for the Blues to suddenly have the angels on their side last term, winning friends all over the country with their amazing performances en route to the final, a run that featured the scalps of four top-flight sides (Union Berlin, Freiburg, Werder Bremen and the mighty Bayer Leverkusen).

In the blink of an eye, the gang of no-hopers has transformed itself into headliners, an organisation that everyone in this part of western Germany wants a piece of.

Club membership numbers have gone through the roof, so have season ticket sales, while a documentary retelling the derring-do of 2024-25 has been packing them in at local cinemas.

Just as importantly, the team so shrewdly led by charismatic coach Michel Kniat clearly has not lost its hunger. In their first game back in the 2. Bundesliga, they thumped Fortuna Dusseldorf 5-1, a win showcasing their togetherness, excellent pressing and slick passing. A week later, spades of team spirit was on show as they beat Holstein Kiel 2-0 away with ten men.

Continuity is the key here. Nine of their usual starting XI from last season remain and the two who did depart – central midfielder Marius Worl (who returned to parent club Hannover) and left-back Louis Oppie (St Pauli) – have been more than adequately replaced. The new left-back, Tim Handwerker, signed on a free transfer from Jahn Regensburg, is an outstanding set-piece expert.

Many are predicting a mid-table finish for the Blues in this season's second tier, but that might be underselling these miracle workers. Usually operating in a well-drilled 4-3-3 system, they are much more tactically flexible than they are given credit for and are rock solid at the back, unafraid to go with a very high defensive line. Disrespect them at your peril.

Nick Bidwell

Back with a bang ...Arminia players celebrate during their first game back in the second tier

SET FOR TIGHT TITLE RACES ACROSS EUROPE

Statement signings... Galatasaray new boys Victor Osimhen and Leroy Sane

Turkey has always attracted big-name signings, but rarely has it landed so many at once – many of whom still have their best years ahead of them. Each of the "Big Three" have invested heavily. Defending champions Galatasaray spent €75 million to sign Victor Osimhen from Napoli after his 37 goals on loan last season. He will have chances created for him by Germany winger Leroy Sane, who arrived on a free transfer from Bayern Munich. Fenerbahce have only lost five league matches in the last two seasons, but have no silverware to show for it. To rectify that, Jose Mourinho's side have signed three former Premier League players: striker Jhon Duran, midfielder Sofyan Amrabat and full-back Nelson Semedo, along with ex-PSG centre-back Milan Skriniar following last season's loan. As for Besiktas, they have strengthened their midfield by adding the class of Turkey's Orkun Kokcu from Benfica and the steel of ex-Leicester City man Wilfred Ndidi. England striker Tammy Abraham, on loan from Milan, will provide the goals.

In **Austria**, Sturm Graz are aiming to win their third title in a row, but there is little reason to believe that they are about to emulate Red Bull Salzburg's ten-year era of dominance. Last season's title was only won by a whisker, clinched on the final day with two other sides in contention. Surprisingly, Salzburg were not one of those sides, and the Red Bull outfit's summer activity suggests they are more focused on developing talent under former academy coach Thomas Letsch. At the time of writing, they had signed a number of young prospects while cashing in on the likes of Oscar Gloukh (to Ajax), Amar Dedic (Benfica), Samson Baidoo (Lens) and Ignace Van der Brempt (Como), generating a healthy profit. Whether that allows Sturm Graz to complete the hat-trick or opens the door to last season's other final-day contenders, Wolfsberger and Austria Vienna, remains to be seen.

Like Austria in 2023-24, last year **Croatia** saw the end of a long title-winning streak as Dinamo Zagreb were toppled by Rijeka. But once again, the summer intrigue comes from Hajduk Split. In recent years, the club has repeatedly (and unsuccessfully) tried to return to glory with ageing Croatia heroes, but they're not ready to give up on that formula just yet. Former Milan winger Ante Rebic, 31, will attempt what Ivan Perisic, Nikola Kalinic and Ivan Rakitic have all failed to do, and bring the title back to Split for the first time since 2005.

That was a method that worked for Basel in **Switzerland** last season, as they bounced back from a disastrous 2023-24 campaign to win the title, thanks in large part to returning hero Xherdan Shaqiri. The 33-year-old playmaker is contracted until 2027 and shows no sign of slowing down.

Hungry for silverware... Fenerbahce manager Jose Mourinho

Could this be the season that the title finally changes hands in **Serbia**? Only Bulgaria's Ludogorets are on a longer title-winning streak than Red Star Belgrade, who have added Austria striker Marko Arnautovic to their ranks. But their eternal rivals Partizan Belgrade, in their first full season of their new era under sporting director (and former striker) Predrag Mijatovic and head coach Srdjan Blagojevic, are dreaming big.

In **Greece**, Olympiacos were back to their dominant best in 2024-25. Selling 18-year-old wonderkid Charalampos Kostoulas, who played a relatively minor role in last year's title win, to Brighton for almost £30m has allowed them to strengthen elsewhere while remaining in profit. AEK Athens could offer a challenge though, with their new-look attack of Luka Jovic (see page 22) and Switzerland winger Dereck Kutesa, who produced career-best numbers for Swiss side Servette last season.

Meanwhile in **Cyprus**, Pafos are aiming to kick-start their own era of dominance. Backed by a Russian billionaire since 2017, they won their first-ever league title last season and have demonstrated their ambition by signing ex-Brazil, Chelsea and Arsenal defender David Luiz from Fortaleza.

Jamie Evans

CALL ME JOBE

He might carry the weight of a famous surname, but Jobe Bellingham is determined to tread his own path

Words: Sean Cole

A low cross from the right was shovelled away and up into the air by goalkeeper Ronwen Williams. Jobe Bellingham checked his run into the penalty area and adjusted his body. He composed himself, held off the pressure, chested the ball, let it bounce, and then sent his volley low into the net.

After joining Borussia Dortmund for an initial fee of £27.8 million, Jobe scored on just his second appearance, helping them to a thrilling 4-3 win over Mamelodi Sundowns at this summer's Club World Cup. The rangy midfielder with the famous surname was already making waves. For a change, it was Jobe dominating the headlines. Determined not to be upstaged, Jude responded with a goal of his own the very next day as Real Madrid beat Pachuca.

Although they are separated by just over two years in age, Jobe is accustomed to living in his older brother's shadow. Realistically, he never had much choice. On his rapid ascent to the apex of club and international football, Jude set high standards that were almost impossible to emulate. An extraordinary talent, he was so far ahead of the curve that Jobe was resigned to lagging behind.

Now their paths are starting to converge. In fact, they would have met in the Club World Cup quarter-finals if Jobe hadn't been suspended for picking up his second yellow card of the tournament against Monterrey, denying the family a fairy-tale moment. There will surely be other opportunities to play against each other, but at least Jobe is finally being recognised as more than just Jude's brother – he's a promising player in his own right.

"He can be as good as he wants to be. He has all the potential," says Lee Bowyer, who gave Jobe his professional debut for Birmingham City in January 2022. "He's quick, he's strong, he's

BVB 09
vodafo
BVB 09

EFL debut...Jobe in action against Preston in January 2022

Combative...Jobe in action for Birmingham against his future club Sunderland

powerful. He can receive the ball, he can pass the ball, he can score goals. He can do everything. He's definitely got a bright future."

Born in nearby Stourbridge, Jobe was eight when he joined Birmingham's academy. He was considered a top prospect, going on to represent England at youth level like his brother, and they had many similar attributes. Both were exceptionally well-rounded midfielders, combining ease on the ball with grit and resilience, and sharing an admiration for Steven Gerrard.

Above all else, it was the attitude of the Bellingham brothers that set them apart from their peers. Polite and respectful, eager to learn and receptive to instructions, they were a coach's dream. But they were incredibly driven too. Parents Mark and Denise instilled a level-headed maturity in their boys, which comes across in the way they speak and act. They are bright and self-reflective, giving articulate interviews and making considered decisions to advance their careers.

It certainly helps that Mark, a former police officer and prolific non-league striker, understands football as both a game and a business. "They're grounded people. They won't let Jobe get ahead of himself," says Bowyer of the Bellingham parents. "We've seen it with thousands of young players coming through, but I don't see that with him. I think his parents are very good at guiding their lads, especially with what they did with Jude at such a young age. I see Jobe going down the same sort of path."

Jobe was introduced to the first-team squad under Bowyer and held his own. In August 2021, he was twice an unused substitute for Blues' League Cup ties against Colchester United and Fulham. Still just 15, he would have broken Jude's record as the club's youngest-ever player if he'd come on, but it wasn't to be.

"He'd be turning up in his school uniform, with his rucksack on his back, and then sitting on the bench with us," recalls Bowyer. "His body wasn't physically ready for that step at the time, but you could just tell that, technically, he knew the game. He wanted to learn. He put himself in good positions.

"He didn't shy away. He believed in his own ability, and, if he did make a mistake, which every player does, he just brushed it aside and carried on like nothing had happened. He was very mature for his age. He could have hidden, but if you have that drive,

> "He'd be turning up in his school uniform, with his rucksack on his back, and then sitting on the bench with us"
>
> **Former Birmingham City manager Lee Bowyer**

Key influence...ex-Birmingham City manager Lee Bowyer watches Jobe in action in 2022

The Bellinghams ...Jude celebrates winning the 2024 Champions League with his parents and younger brother

and that mentality, then you don't hide. You take the ball again."

For all their similarities, the crucial difference between the Bellingham brothers was in their rate of physical development. At 16, Jude was strong and robust enough to be a Championship regular. In contrast, Jobe was tall yet slight, so used much more sparingly. He was better suited to brief cameos in more advanced positions, limiting his defensive responsibilities. His debut came in an FA Cup third-round defeat to Plymouth Argyle in January 2022 and he then made two league appearances before the end of the season.

That summer, Jobe agreed to sign his first professional contract when he turned 17. Under new manager John Eustace, he played infrequently as Birmingham once more fought to avoid relegation.

Towards the end of the season, he was given more opportunities, but rumours began to swirl about his future. His mentors, Kristjaan Speakman and Mike Dodds, had left the Birmingham academy to become Sunderland's sporting director and head of individual player development respectively, while Stuart English also joined the Black Cats as head of coaching. All three had built close relationships with the Bellingham family through Jude and Jobe.

Play-off victors...Jobe lifts the Championship play-off trophy

Key player...Jobe celebrates helping Sunderland reach the play-off final

Amid these stories, some local journalists and club insiders suggested that Eustace was under pressure to play Jobe so he could be convinced to stay at Blues. The idea gained traction after his first start came, seemingly out of nowhere, against Sunderland in November. The identity of the opponent felt like more than mere coincidence. Jobe looked out of his depth and was withdrawn on 59 minutes with Birmingham trailing 2-0.

After missing three months with an abdominal strain, he returned to start the last four games of the season once Birmingham's Championship status was secure. Beyond being neat and tidy on the ball, Jobe made little serious impression. Unhelpful comparisons with the revered Jude, who has a mural outside St Andrew's, were felt most acutely at his hometown club.

An inevitable parting of the ways was soon confirmed. Mark Bellingham, who now represents both his sons, always encouraged them to gain as much first-team experience as possible at an early age, but that wasn't happening with Jobe. At Birmingham, there was reportedly a clause in his contract that allowed him to leave for a set fee if he didn't play a certain number of minutes.

Jobe joined Sunderland for around £3 million, plus a 15 per cent cut of any future profit. Speakman, Dodds and English were integral to the deal, which served as a prime example of the Black Cats' new recruitment strategy. Sunderland positioned themselves as a stepping-stone for young players, who could develop quickly through regular game time as part of a dynamic, possession-oriented team, before being sold on for the right price.

> "They're two different people. From the beginning, I think he's tried to separate himself from his brother and have his own career"
>
> **Lee Bowyer**

The brothers notably moved clubs on the same day – 14 June 2023. Mark went to live with Jobe on Wearside, while his wife Denise accompanied Jude to Madrid. Leaving Blues represented a fresh start and a symbolic break from the past, which Jobe embraced. Perhaps he needed it.

In an attempt to alleviate undue pressure, he chose to defy convention by having "Jobe" printed on the back of his shirt instead of "Bellingham". The idea came from Dodds, who thought it would help the teenager

Call me Jobe ...the younger Bellingham brother

carve out his own identity. He's done the same at Dortmund. Jobe has never wanted Jude's success to define him.

"They're two different people. From the beginning, I think he's tried to separate himself from his brother and have his own career," says Bowyer. "It wasn't like he was trying to copy his brother, or live off the back of him. It was the complete opposite. It was like: 'Right, I'm Jobe, and I'm going to do it my way.' And he did it well. I just felt that he was always his own person – 100 per cent."

During his first year at Sunderland, there were occasional grumbles about Jobe as the club persevered with him through fluctuations in form. Of his 45 appearances in the league in 2023-24, all but two were starts. Supporters were sometimes frustrated with the midfielder's decision-making and tendency to dwell on the ball. There were accusations that his development was being prioritised over the needs of the team.

Instability made matters worse. Tony Mowbray, Michael Beale and then Dodds each had spells in charge, with Sunderland's play-off challenge fizzling out badly. They dropped to 16th after winning just two of their last 15 games. Jobe still scored an impressive seven goals in total, including a match-winning brace against Rotherham United in August. Often played as a No.10, he even served as a makeshift striker at times.

In June 2024, Regis Le Bris took charge of Sunderland and soon brought the best out of Jobe.

First Dortmund goal... Jobe volleys home against Mamelodi Sundowns

Dortmund have a track record of turning wonderkids into established stars and Jobe is hungry to follow suit

The 19-year-old had grown into his body and become much more consistent, able to cope with the demands of Championship football, while a settled position as the box-to-box player on the left of a three-man midfield helped.

"He's showing he has all the attributes to be a top midfielder," says Bowyer, who fulfilled a similar role in his career. "He's an all-rounder, a bit like his brother. He can play anywhere in the middle of the park.

"He's just a young boy, but playing for Sunderland, I saw him driving through the midfield, putting his body on the line, tackling back, running back, working hard for the team."

Jobe now blends elegance with intensity. This more combative side to his game was borne out by ten yellow cards and one red, the first of his career, last season. He never shirks a duel or neglects the defensive side of the game. Already seen as a leader, he takes pride in being disciplined and hard-working. Willing to receive the ball in all areas of the pitch, his long legs enable him to nip in and regain possession after any loose touches.

Only four Sunderland players clocked up more minutes than the midfielder last season. Although the team limped over the finishing line with five straight defeats, they recovered well in the play-offs. Jobe passionately celebrated his tackle to deny Haji Wright a late equaliser in the semi-final first leg against Coventry City. Sunderland went on to win 3-2 on aggregate before upsetting Sheffield United at Wembley to seal promotion.

A great breakthrough season was deservedly recognised by Jobe's peers. He was the only Sunderland player

Copycat...Jobe imitates his brother's trademark celebration

named in the Championship Team of the Season and also won the division's Young Player of the Year award.

While the Black Cats celebrated a return to the Premier League after eight long years away, a host of clubs, reportedly including Eintracht Frankfurt, Crystal Palace, Tottenham Hotspur and Manchester United, circled.

Jobe assessed his options and chose Dortmund, admitting that he was initially reluctant to do so because his brother had enjoyed so much success there previously. He instinctively wanted to make his own mark somewhere else. CEO Hans-Joachim Watzke eventually persuaded him that it was important to make the right decision rather than a different one.

Dortmund have a track record of turning wonderkids into established stars and Jobe is hungry to follow suit. He visited Westfalenstadion with his family several times to watch Jude in action and saw first-hand how committed the club were to nurturing him as a player and a person. They have similar faith in Jobe's ability and character, as demonstrated by the five-year contract he signed.

A big adjustment awaits, both on and off the pitch. Rather than scrapping for survival with Sunderland, or facing excessive media scrutiny at one of his Premier League suitors, the playing style and environment at BVB should suit Jobe. They offer an attractive combination of fervent supporters, world-class facilities, Champions League football and the chance to compete for honours. England manager Thomas Tuchel will surely be taking a keen interest in how he fares.

Versatility is a major strength for Jobe, but Bowyer has a clear sense of his best position. "I wouldn't restrict him as a ten, or as a sitter. I see him as a box-to-box midfielder because he's comfortable receiving the ball and knows where to position his body. He does track back. He does compete and tackle and win the ball back for his team, but I also see him getting in the box and scoring goals. To me, he's an eight. He scores goals and helps out defensively."

Jobe took a longer route to Dortmund than Jude. He progressed at his own pace. After three full seasons of Championship football, and more than 100 senior appearances as a teenager, he's ready to test himself in the Bundesliga, but won't be content to stay there too long. Like his brother, Jobe has no shortage of ambition and self-belief. He sees this as an important staging post in his career rather than the ultimate destination.

Jobe Bellingham

the numbers game

ENGLAND U21s

4

CAPS

GOALS

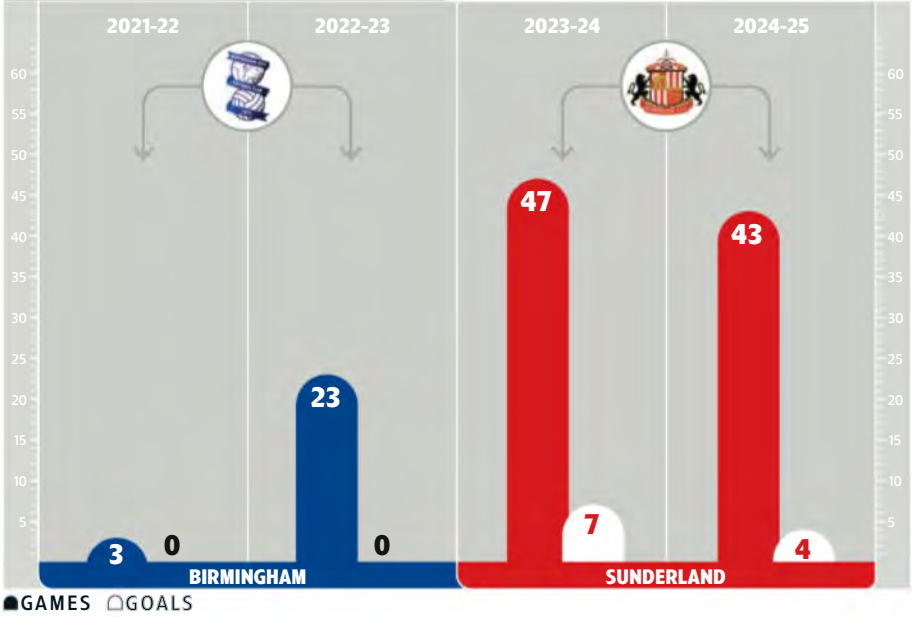
0

DORTMUND'S RECORD SIGNINGS

€35m	**OUSMANE DEMBELE** *2016 (from Rennes)*
€31m	**SEBASTIEN HALLER** *2022 (from Ajax)*
€30.5m	**MATS HUMMELS** *2019 (from Bayern Munich)*
€30.5m	**JOBE BELLINGHAM** *2025 (from Sunderland)*
€30.15m	**JUDE BELLINGHAM** *2020 (from Birmingham)*

EFL CHAMPIONSHIP YOUNG PLAYER OF THE SEASON

2021-22 **BRENNAN JOHNSON** (Nott'm Forest)	*2022-23* **ALEX SCOTT** (Bristol City)
2023-24 **ARCHIE GRAY** (Leeds United)	*2024-25* **JOBE BELLINGHAM** (Sunderland)



ROBERT PROSINECKI

"I didn't think at all about working as a coach – now I love my job"

One of the stars of Croatia's third-place finish at France '98 is dreaming of a return to the World Cup as head coach of neighbouring Montenegro

Your coaching journey began back in 2006, when Slaven Bilic asked you to join his coaching staff with the Croatia national team...
To be honest, at that time I didn't think at all about working as a coach. After Slaven was named national coach, he came to me and asked me to be his assistant. At first, I declined, because I wasn't really interested. But eventually I changed my mind and soon I was totally into it. I found pleasure working in football. I got my coaching badge, up to UEFA Pro licence, and I realised that football was still my life. Football gave me everything and this was a chance to give something back. It's great when you can have a job which fulfils you and I'm happy that I can say that I love my job.

What do you remember from those four years with Croatia working under Bilic?
I think we had a very good period. We qualified for Euro 2008, our team played very well and we got close to a big success. Unfortunately, we lost the quarter-final match against Turkey in a weird way; scoring to make it 1-0 in the 119th minute, conceding the shocking equaliser in the 122nd minute and then losing on penalties. So, there were beautiful memories, but also sad moments, but that's part of the game. We played good football, we beat Germany in the group stage and we were seconds away from getting to a semi-final match against Germany. That would have been a massive success for Croatia. We proved again that we always have talented players.

Croatia have achieved amazing successes at World Cups, and it's a shame that at Euro 2008 we failed to go all the way. We had a good team, with young players like Eduardo da Silva, [Ivan] Rakitic and [Luka] Modric, who became the backbone of our national team.

Later, we failed to qualify for the 2010 World Cup, but, all in all, working with the national team was a fine experience.

Your first job as head coach was with Red Star Belgrade, where you won the European Cup in 1991. But it was a brave move – Red Star were struggling, and many in Croatia were unhappy that you took a job in Serbia...
Well, to get your first job at a club like Red Star is a big thing. The problems in the club at that time and the public opinion in Croatia didn't worry me, because, after all, it was the club where I played for four years and they gave me a chance to be the head coach of such a big club. It's true that in those one-and-a-half years it wasn't easy for us. We won only one cup, which is not enough by the standards of Red Star. But in such a situation, to achieve more was probably impossible. Still, it was a big experience for me and it helped me for my further career. If the club had not been struggling, perhaps they wouldn't have hired me. Regardless of the problems, it was a pleasure for me to work at Red Star.

After Red Star, you took over Kayserispor in Turkey and finished the 2012-13 season in fifth place. How did you achieve that?
Kayserispor had a good team, but when I arrived they were second from bottom in the table. We worked hard, things clicked, the team put in strong performances and it resulted with one of the biggest successes in the club's history. In the end, we were close to a spot for Europa League qualification. It was a phenomenal season and a great experience for me. Unfortunately, in the second season, many players were sold, there were some problems in the club, we were struggling and I had to leave. That's the way things work in this business. At the end of the day, everything depends on the results. You know the saying: "There are two types of coaches – those who were sacked and those who will be sacked". I guess that Alex Ferguson is the only exception in that. But, all in all, Turkey was a fine experience. It's a country crazy for football, packed with talent, and lot of money is being invested in football.

You were head coach of the Azerbaijan national team for three years, but then turned down a new contract. Why?
It was a phenomenal time with Azerbaijan. ➤

LEGEA

We did really well. We collected ten points in the [2018] World Cup qualifiers. We beat Norway, and got a draw against the Czech Republic. [Azerbaijan] have good players, but the main problem is they all play in the domestic league, so they never get a chance to play at a really high level. The only exception is Qarabag, who often play in Europe, but they have many foreign players.

It's true that Azerbaijan wanted me to stay, and I was super happy there. But after three years, I was eager for a new challenge. Perhaps it was a mistake that I didn't stay, but that's what I decided.

Your next job, with Bosnia & Herzegovina, was not as successful. Why?

In the beginning, things went very well. In the

World Cup hero ...Prosinecki starred in Croatia's third-place finish at France '98

Successful spell ...Prosinecki was "super happy" as Azerbaijan coach

[2018-19] Nations League, we won our group and we won promotion to Division A. In Vienna we drew with Austria, at home we beat them. We beat Northern Ireland twice. Then, in the Euro 2020 qualifiers we started with a victory against Armenia, and then came that home game against Greece, where we were 2-0 up but in the end with ten men we barely saved a draw. In the away game against Finland, we put in a poor performance and lost 2-0. Against Italy [in Turin] we played an even game. We took the lead and missed a couple of great chances, and in the end we lost 2-1 in a game where we did not deserve to lose. But that's football. Often small details and luck decide the final score.

You have worked as a coach at both club level and international level. Which role suits you more?
I can't really say that one or the other role suits me more. As we know, they are definitely very different. In a club you can work on a daily basis, you have the chance to change and adjust things in training, while as a national coach you have little time to work with your team. On the other hand, as national coach you have the privilege that you can select all the best players from that country. I can't tell which role I prefer. I was happy as a club coach and I'm also happy as a national coach.

Have you ever experienced, as a player or coach, going 2-0 down after just three minutes, as you did with Montenegro at home to Wales last year?
No, I can't remember any such situation. It was a shock. It was weird. Usually, such games go in the direction that you lose 4-0 or 5-0.

> "You know the saying: 'There are two types of coaches – those who were sacked and those who will be sacked'"

But we fought back, we dominated, we scored, we had chances to score the equaliser, [Stevan] Jovetic hit the crossbar, [Vladimir] Jovovic hit the post. I think that we deserved at least a draw, but sadly we lost 2-1.

Earlier this year you said that you believed that Montenegro could qualify for the 2026 World Cup.

Are you still optimistic after the 2-0 defeat away to the Czech Republic and with two games against Croatia to come?
There is no doubt that Croatia are favourites to win our group. They proved it also with that 5-1 win against the Czech Republic, who are by no means a poor team. Our aim is to fight with the Czechs for second place and to reach the play-offs, where we would look for a chance to qualify for the World Cup. I hope and believe that we can do that. Montenegro have never qualified for a major tournament, so if we manage to qualify it would be a great success.

In September, you'll return to Zagreb to face Croatia. How will you feel listening to the Croatian national anthem while coaching against your homeland?
I have great memories of my time as a Croatia international. It was always emotional and that's normal when you play for your country. Naturally, the game against Croatia won't be like any other game. It will be a special game for me. After all, it will be played in my hometown Zagreb, the city where my family and I live today. However, I'm a professional and on that day my only objective will be to get a good result for Montenegro – if that's possible. As for listening to the Croatian anthem in the dugout of the opponent team, I experienced it already with Azerbaijan. It's unusual, but it's no big deal.

Interview by Vladimir Novak

ABOVE: Shock start...Prosinecki watches his Montenegro team in torrential rain during the match against Wales LEFT: World Cup hopefuls...Montenegro players line up ahead of their 2026 World Cup qualifier against Gibraltar

BULGARIA

As they set out on the road to the 2026 World Cup, Bulgaria are dreaming of recreating their famous summer of 1994. But, as Rumen Paytashev explains, it might prove difficult for the current crop to emulate that Golden Generation

Bulgaria appeared in four World Cups in a row between 1962 and 1974 and then, with their Golden Generation of the 1990s, reached the semi-finals at USA '94. But since 2002, the Bulgarians have been absent from the FIFA finals. Where did it all go so wrong?

The short answer is that in a small country like Bulgaria, with a population a little over six million, players like Hristo Stoichkov, Krasimir Balakov, Borislav Mihaylov, Yordan Letchkov and Emil Kostadinov do not come along very

Bulgaria national team...the current squad pose for a team photo earlier this year

often. That generation was succeeded by Dimitar Berbatov, Martin Petrov and the country's most capped player, Stiliyan Petrov, but that trio have all been retired since 2011, and there has been little to shout about since.

Critics compare the situation with that of Croatia, a country with a little more than half of Bulgaria's population, who also reached a World Cup semi-final in the 1990s and more recently finished second at Russia 2018 and third in Qatar in 2022. If the Croatians can recreate the magic of the '90s, then why can't Bulgaria?

A response can be found by looking at the two countries' domestic leagues. While Croatian clubs have a proven track record of selling local talents for big fees, Bulgaria's top flight does not attract the same level of interest. According to *Transfermarkt*, the record departure from a Bulgarian team is Brazilian striker Igor Thiago's €11 million move from Ludogorets to Club Brugge in 2023. Meanwhile, 14 players have left the Croatian league for transfer fees of equal or greater value, with all but one of them (Spain attacking midfielder Dani Olmo) becoming Croatia internationals. The record sale for a Bulgarian player from a Bulgarian club is still Georgi Ivanov's €4.6m move from Levski Sofia to Rennes in 2002. Indeed, Stoichkov's transfer from CSKA Sofia to Barcelona 35 years ago is still the seventh-biggest deal in the league's history.

In short, Bulgaria is not producing enough top-class footballers, which means that its clubs have become increasingly reliant on foreign imports. Last season, 44 per cent of the league's players came from abroad, with Ludogorets leading the way. At least they can point to a record of success with the policy, having won the league title 14 years in a row, but the sight of teams battling against relegation with low-quality imports is a depressing one for the Bulgarian Football Union (BFU).

Concerned that Bulgarian players are having their pathways blocked, the BFU has attempted to address the situation. After a lot of discussion, they announced that for the 2025-26 season, every team in the First Division must have five Bulgarian players in the starting line-up, including at least one Under-21 player. If they don't, they will have to pay a fine of €200,000 per season.

Ludogorets appear to have calculated that this is a price worth paying to maintain top spot, as they

Bulgaria's greatest? ...Hristo Stoichkov at the 1994 World Cup in the USA

Dream summer... Bulgaria players during their run to the 1994 World Cup semi-finals

Captain...Kiril Despodov misses from the penalty spot against Northern Ireland

began their season with a 5-0 win over Septemvri Sofia using just three Bulgarians in their starting XI.

In the short term then, the likeliest outcome is that Ludogorets will have even more of a procession to the title than usual. Certainly the change will not affect the national team's hopes of making it to North America next summer. The problems run much deeper than just giving youngsters more opportunities.

Bulgaria's football infrastructure is fundamentally weak. The stadiums are in poor condition, largely falling short of FIFA and UEFA requirements. The national stadium Vassil Levski in Sofia is too old, but even the newer grounds have suffered from a lack of sufficient investment. Many of the clubs face financial difficulties, with some even struggling to be licensed to play in the First Division. Few if any talented youngsters emerge from the clubs' academies, where youth coaches are underpaid and underqualified. Often, the academies are simply opportunities for rich parents to pick their own sons.

Whatever the BFU does to attempt to address the malaise, the results will not be seen for two or three years at the very least. In the meantime, there is little to get excited about.

Of the current national team squad, the goalkeepers have promise. Dimitar Mitov was the hero of Aberdeen's Scottish Cup triumph, saving two penalties in the final against Celtic. He is competing for the No.1 shirt with Levski's Svetoslav Vutsov, 23, the grandson of Ivan, a famous figure in Bulgarian football.

Promising goalkeeper... highly-rated Bulgaria and Aberdeen shot-stopper Dimitar Mitov

There are high hopes for Leeds United midfielder Ilia Gruev ahead of his first season in the Premier League, while captain and star forward Kiril Despodov, a serial title winner with Ludogorets and five-time Bulgarian Footballer of the Year, now playing in Greece for PAOK, remains influential.

But this is a far cry from when Bulgarians could be seen at some of Europe's biggest clubs, from Stoichkov at Barcelona and Kostadinov at Bayern Munich, to Berbatov at Manchester United and Petrov at Celtic. These days, no Bulgarians are playing at that level.

Appointed in 2023, head coach Ilian Iliev got off to a reasonable start by going unbeaten in his first nine games – albeit drawing seven of them – but that run was brought to a crushing end by a 5-0 defeat to Northern Ireland in October last year. Three more defeats have followed since, including to the Republic of Ireland in both legs of the Nations League play-off, which kept the Bulgarians in League C.

Iliev has been subjected to plenty of scrutiny, not least because of the unusual nature of his contract with the BFU. Alongside his national team duties, the 57-year-old also manages club side Cherno More. He is not the first to do it: in the 1960s, Rudolf Vytlacil led Bulgaria and Levski Sofia simultaneously, but the Czechoslovakian

had already led his home country to the 1962 World Cup final, and then guided Bulgaria to the 1966 finals. Iliev has no such track record to fall back on. He was expected to step down from Cherno when his contract ended in the summer of 2024, but having steered the team to second place behind Ludogorets opted to stay on for the European campaign.

"It's not my idea to be in charge of both squads," said Iliev. "If the BFU offer me a choice, I will do that. But if I am the problem, I will go without complaint."

Pressure has increased since poor friendly results in June, a 2-2 draw at home to Cyprus and a 4-0 away defeat to Greece, which BFU president Georgi Ivanov angrily described as "a shame for Bulgaria."

"This is our level," admitted Anton Nedyalkov, captain of Ludogorets and one of the few Bulgarians playing for the perennial champions. Skipper Despodov, who didn't play in either game due to injury, said: "I watched both games. We didn't do well. There is still a lot to be desired from this team."

It is hardly an inspiring rallying cry as they attempt to rekindle the magic of 1994. The road back to the US begins in September with a visit from Spain before a trip across the Black Sea to face Georgia. They have nothing to lose, and a sell-out crowd is expected when the European champions come to Sofia. But fans will attend with little expectation of recreating the fond memories of the 1990s.

Juggling act...Bulgaria head coach Ilian Iliev also manages Cherno More

USA '94

Wind the clock back 31 years, and the situation around the Bulgaria national team was very different.

So absorbed into World Cup folklore are Bulgaria's heroes of 1994, that it is easy to forget that their campaign began somewhat inauspiciously. Yet after losing 3-0 to Nigeria, they bounced back with a 4-0 defeat of Greece, before really making the rest of the world sit up and take notice by beating Argentina 2-0.

It took a penalty shootout to overcome Mexico in the last 16, before world champions Germany loomed in the quarter-final. Lothar Matthaus seemed to have brought the Bulgarians' journey to an end, before three magical second-half minutes saw Hristo Stoichkov equalise and Yordan Letchkov head them into the last four.

"Before the match I was sure that we would win," Letchkov told *World Soccer* years later. "We had a great generation, and most of them played for big European clubs. We had the confidence to fight against the biggest teams in the world. Most of us were between 26 and 28 – the perfect age to demonstrate our experience.

"We enjoyed the regime of coach Dimitar Penev. He was behind us, he made us feel free. We Balkans enjoy freedom by nature and this impressed us. But we were a team in which everybody knew what to do."

A brace from Italy's Roberto Baggio dumped the Bulgarians out in the semi-final. But they departed with the respect of the rest of the world – plus a Golden Boot for Stoichkov and, later that year, the Ballon d'Or.

Historic...Letchkov heads the iconic winning goal against Germany in New Jersey

Glenn Moore

Brazil and Nigeria crowned continental queens

Copa America Femenina and WAFCON both produced thrilling finales, but problems remain

While the European Championship stole much of the spotlight this northern hemisphere summer, it was not the only continental tournament taking place – nor the only one with a dramatic finale.

The night before England's penalty-shootout victory over world champions Spain, Nigeria rallied from 2-0 down to stun holders and hosts Morocco to take the Women's Africa Cup of Nations title with an 88th-minute winner amid penalty VAR controversy.

The following week the Copa America Femenina in Ecuador delivered a final that had almost everything, concluding with Brazil defeating Colombia on penalties after a pulsating 4-4 draw.

But while the Euros were breaking attendance records and confirming women's football's place in Europe's sporting calendar (more on page 86) elsewhere it was a different story.

The familiar complaints of misogyny, under-investment and corruption remain, with poor crowds the visible indicator of a sport in which progress remains slow outside of Western Europe and North America.

Most concerning, given the impending 2027 World Cup in Brazil, was the situation in South America. The whole tournament was held in Quito, Ecuador, with two venues staging the 20 group matches, mostly as double-headers, and the 41,575 Estadio Rodrigo Paz Delgado used for the knockouts.

Pressure on the pitches led to CONMEBOL organisers initially making players warm up indoors, but facilities were inadequate. Brazil forward Kerolin, used to the facilities of Manchester City, wrote on social media: "While at the Euros they are breaking records in technology, we are warming up in a room with a maximum of 20 square metres, smelling of paint."

Crowd figures were not revealed but television pictures suggested they were very poor, not helped by tickets only going on sale eight days before the opening game. The final drew around 24,000, but many group games, staged in capacities of 12,000 and 18,000 respectively, struggled to reach 1,000.

Only the semi-finals and final had VAR, and there were also concerning individual tales reported such as Uruguay refusing to train after a dispute over training facilities and daily allowances, finally agreeing to play 72 hours before their first match.

In the circumstances, *Las Celestes* performed well, drawing with the hosts and going on to reach the semi-finals behind Group A winners Argentina.

Brazil topped Group B ahead of Colombia, who then beat Argentina on penalties to set up a final with Brazil, who had beaten Uruguay 5-1.

In an extraordinary match, Colombia, despite being pushed back for much of the game, led three times and looked to have won it when Mayra Ramirez put them ahead in the 88th minute.

But Marta, on as a substitute, scored a thunderous 25-yard strike with the last kick of normal time to force extra-time. There, she inevitably struck again with a clever finish only for Leicy Santos' exquisite free-kick to force penalties.

Marta's fairy-tale comeback took an unexpected twist when the 39-year-old missed the chance to seal victory in the shootout, but Lorena saved the 14th kick, taken by Jorelyn Carabali, and the *Canarinhas* had secured their ninth success in ten editions. Colombia took some consolation from securing a place at the 2028 Summer Olympics in LA along with Brazil.

It wasn't a great night for Brighton centre-back Carabali who, perhaps forgetting VAR had been introduced, conceded a penalty for a daft off-the-ball butt on Gio. She escaped a red card but Angelina's spot-kick cancelled out Linda Caicedo's opener.

Tarciane's wayward back-pass then handed Colombia another lead but half-time sub Amanda Gutierres expertly controlled and converted a deep cross to level in the 80th minute.

Ramirez, combining with Caicedo,

South American champions...Marta lifts Brazil's ninth Copa America Femenina trophy

> "While at the Euros they are breaking records in technology, we are warming up in a room with a maximum of 20 square metres, smelling of paint"
>
> Brazil and Manchester City forward Kerolin

Decisive...Marta celebrates after scoring in the final

then thought she had won it on the counter-attack. But the extraordinary Marta had other ideas.

"I was already anticipating that the ball could bounce back to me," Marta said. "Hitting a shot like that, it was a banger. Perfect. I think that even a men's goalkeeper couldn't save it, because it was extremely fast."

Success earned Brazil $1.5 million, while WAFCON winners Nigeria won $1m – both big increases in prize money albeit well off the men's equivalents.

Nigeria's victorious players were also promised $100,000 and a free apartment each by national president Bola Tinubu, who pledged to ensure they received their pay and allowances too, plus backdated payments owing.

WAFCON champions... Nigeria claim Africa's continental prize for a record tenth time

However, such promises have not always been fulfilled in the past and the team achieved their tenth WAFCON success despite having had problems arranging warm-up matches and with the provision of training kit.

The triumph justified the Nigerian federation's decision to make former assistant Justine Madugu coach. He ended up outsmarting World Cup-winning Jorge Vilda, who Morocco appointed after his axing by Spain in the fall-out of the Luis Rubiales affair.

The group stages had gone as expected handing hosts Morocco a gentle path to the final, though they needed penalties to overcome Ghana in the semi-finals.

Nigeria had to defeat potent Zambia, which they did 5-0, keeping a clean sheet against NWSL trio Barbra Banda, Racheal Kundananji and Grace Chanda, then holders South Africa. A 94th-minute goal by Houston Dash's Michelle Alozie clinched that 2-1.

Morocco led the final 2-0 with more than an hour gone after first-half goals by Ghizlane Chebbak and Sanaa Mssoudy, but the celebrating capacity 21,000-crowd were silenced by Toronto's Esther Okoronkwo. She scored a penalty given via VAR for handball then set up Folashade Ijamilusi for the equaliser.

Morocco were then also awarded a penalty for handball, only for VAR to cancel it. As extra-time loomed, Paris Saint-Germain's Jennifer Echegini neatly turned in Okoronkwo's fine free-kick for the winner.

There has been considerable investment in the women's game in Morocco, including hosting three successive WAFCONs, and the Royal Moroccan Football Federation took it badly. They called for an investigation into the "refereeing injustice" and the director of refereeing at CAF has reportedly been sacked.

Other issues arising were meagre crowds when Morocco weren't playing, partly due to inadequate marketing. There were also complaints of poor accommodation, and by coaches of insufficient preparation time, both beforehand (the schedule was only announced in June) and during the event.

But CAF general-secretary Veron Mosengo-Omba pointed out to *BBC Sport Africa*: "Europe, to reach this level, started about 25-30 years ago."

Twenty years ago England hosted the Euros. Outside of the final and England matches, the biggest crowd was 5,722, France v Italy drew less than 1,000.

"Success is not built in one day," added Mosengo-Omba. "The potential is there, give us the time to work hard."

Round-up

SOLOMON ISLANDS MAKE HISTORY
The Solomon Islands defeated ten-women Papua New Guinea 3-2 in extra-time to win the Oceania Nations Cup for the first time, having twice been pegged back by the holders. With no qualification at stake for other tournaments, New Zealand did not compete, with the Cook Islands, Samoa, Tahiti, Tonga, Vanuatu and hosts Fiji making up the rest of the field.

ASIAN CUP TO KICK OFF IN PERTH
The draw for the 2026 Asian Cup revealed the opening game to be Australia versus Philippines in Perth on March 1. South Korea and Iran, who clinched the final place in qualify, are also in the group.

Sole debutants Bangladesh were drawn with holders China, Uzbekistan and North Korea. Favourites Japan are grouped with Vietnam, Chinese Taipei and India.

SMITH BECOMES FIRST £1M PLAYER
Olivia Smith became the first £1m player in the women's game after transferring from Liverpool to Arsenal on a four-year deal. The fee was a fivefold increase on the £200,000 Liverpool paid Sporting a year ago, indicative of both the rising fees in the women's game and the Canadian's huge potential, highlighted by her impact in the WSL last season. Smith, who was 21 in August, made her debut for Canada in 2019 aged just 15.

EVERTON WOMEN SOLD OFF
Everton became the third WSL side to be hived off from their men's team and sold to a separate branch of their owners' holdings, following Chelsea and Aston Villa. The move helps the men's team meet Premier League profit and sustainability regulations and also allows for external investment. Everton women are to play at Goodison Park following the men's move to a new stadium.

PRIESTMAN RETURNS TO WORK
Bev Priestman is back in work as head coach of Wellington Phoenix, the New Zealand club who compete in Australia's W-League. It is her first role since being sacked as coach of Canada and banned for a year by FIFA after the drone spying scandal at the 2024 Olympics.

DENVER AIM FOR NWSL'S SUMMIT
The two expansion teams taking NWSL to 16 teams next year now have names – Denver Summit and Boston Legacy. Summit is a reference to Colorado's mountains while Legacy replaced the initial choice of BOS Nation, which drew a negative response.

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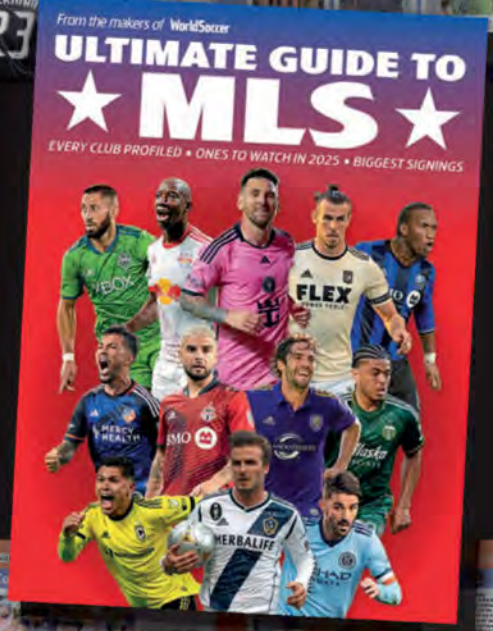

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2025 Women's European Championship...squad lists

'Proper English' Lionesses find a way to win

England's incredible Euro 2025 victory was built upon self-belief, resilience, smart substitutions and an indomitable spirit, writes **Glenn Moore**

Champions once again...Lionesses celebrate with the trophy

"From the first game it was chaos."

So said England head coach Sarina Wiegman in the wake of her team's Euro 2025 penalty-shootout victory over 2023 World Cup winners Spain, completing what she also described as a "ridiculous" title defence. As so often, she wasn't wrong.

It was Wiegman's third successive triumph having coached her native Netherlands to the 2017 crown, but utterly unlike the others. In 2017, the Dutch trailed for just four minutes all tournament, won every game and looked increasingly serene as they eased to success. In 2022, England required extra-time twice and were behind to Spain for 30 minutes in the quarter-final, but their progress was mostly smooth.

At Euro 2025...where to begin?

Perhaps before the tournament, when star goalkeeper Mary Earps announced her international retirement and Millie Bright, who captained England to the 2023 World Cup final, withdrew to protect her mental health.

The Lionesses then lost their opening game, outclassed by the impressive French. Fortuitously that sent them into a theoretically easier half of the draw, but it didn't look like it as they battled through extra-time in all three sudden-death ties and two penalty shootouts before becoming the first senior England team of either gender to win a major tournament overseas.

Were England the best team at the Euros? Probably not

Perhaps most remarkable was that of the 400 minutes played in those matches (including stoppage time) they led for less than five and trailed for 180. That, though, summed up the team's central quality: resilience.

This was best epitomised by the indomitable Lucy Bronze, with the right-back revealing after the final that she had played the tournament with a broken leg, thought to be a stress fracture of the tibia. Then there was goalkeeper Hannah Hampton, cast into the spotlight by Earps' shock exit and shining despite an eye defect that means, in spite of several surgeries as a child, she struggles with depth perception.

"I can't judge distances – so being a goalkeeper doesn't really make a

lot of sense," she once said. But the Chelsea No.1 could see a ball 12 yards away, conceding only three of the 11 shootout-penalties taken against England in Switzerland.

There was Jess Carter who came back from some poor performances and being a target of racist abuse on social media. Afterwards she admitted that she had been "super scared to play...for the first time in my life," yet she produced an impeccable display in the final, having been bolstered by the support of team-mates, family and manager.

And, of course, there was Chloe Kelly. Three years after she returned from 11 months out with an ACL injury to score the winner at Euro 2022 she made another remarkable comeback, this time returning from being cast into the wilderness at Manchester City. Having already helped Arsenal win the Champions League, she played a series of starring roles off the bench at Euro 2025, culminating in coolly converting the final penalty.

She had missed a last-minute spot-kick in the semi-final, bundling home the rebound to send England through. That memory would have unnerved many players but she told herself: "I never miss two in a row", before thumping home the shootout winner.

Self-belief, a dogged refusal to lose, a unity of purpose and spirit, these all epitomised the Lionesses who tagged themselves as "Proper English".

Were they the best team at the Euros? Probably not. It's hard to argue against Spain, while the French, beaten on penalties by Germany, also shone.

But France not only failed to break down a Germany team reduced to ten players for 107 minutes, they also conceded to them. Spain took 113 minutes to score against a Germany team reduced to one regular member of the back four, then failed to make superior possession and chances count against England in the final.

Runners-up...Spain watch England lift the Euros trophy

The potential, and the impact, of the women's game was underlined when an estimated 65,000 fans watched England parade the trophy in central London

La Roja were superb on the ball throughout, their passing as neat as ever, but lacked options and variety when Plan A did not work.

What England possessed was an ability to seize moments through match-winners like Kelly, and dig in when things were going against them. Perhaps more importantly, they also had the best coach in the women's game.

It was a bold move by the Football Association to hire Sarina Wiegman, but it has paid off hugely with back-to-back Euros wins and a World Cup final appearance. Some starting selections may have backfired but her in-game tactical management was excellent and her rapport with players, bluntly honest but warm with it, superb.

Much like in previous tournaments, her forthright manner in outlining roles in advance meant that every player in Switzerland knew where they stood. If that meant being a sub (or "finisher"), they embraced it.

All five of England's goals in the knockout stages were made or scored by substitutes, two by teenage revelation Michelle Agyemang, a ball girl at Wembley just four years earlier.

Wiegman was run close as best coach by two newcomers, Italy's Andrea Soncin and Germany's Christian Wuck.

The latter admirably marshalled and motivated his depleted forces – Germany had also lost Lena Oberdorf before the Euros began – and was within a tight penalty call of reaching the final.

As it was, *Le Azzurre's* performance, and perhaps the heartbreaking manner of their exit, should accelerate the game's already rapid revival in Italy, which was one of

Victory parade... the Lionesses on The Mall in London

Super subs...England and Arsenal duo Chloe Kelly and Michelle Agyemang pose with the trophy

the sport's early strongholds after the widespread bans on women's football were lifted in the 1970s.

Euro 2025 should also boost development elsewhere, notably Poland and Wales, who were making their major tournament bows, but especially hosts Switzerland whose population took their team and the tournament to their hearts.

Fears that smaller stadia, football's lower profile in Switzerland, and the sheer expense of visiting one of the world's most expensive countries would lead to a drop in attendances were spectacularly debunked.

Records were broken as foreign fans travelled in large numbers and locals bought into the event. All but two group-stage games were sold out, with Germany v Denmark drawing 34,165 fans – the highest attendance at any Women's Euros group game not involving a host nation.

The knockout games all drew 22,000-plus and while capacity limitations meant the highest gate – 34,203 for the Basel final – was less than half the 87,192 that saw England beat Germany at Wembley in 2022, the overall attendance of 657,291 was 82,426 up on Euro 2022, while a match average of 21,203 compared to 18,544 in England.

Record-breaking... Germany v Denmark had the highest crowd for a non-host's game in the group stage

In December, when UEFA belatedly picks the hosts for 2029, it is clear that stadium capacity should be a key factor. Switzerland, like England, utilised two sub-10,000 venues. That will not happen again but the current stipulation that one stadium should be capable of holding 50,000, three 30,000 and four 20,000 is too modest.

Of the five bids for 2029, Germany comfortably has the best collection of large stadia – as shown when hosting the men's 2024 European Championship. Italy, Poland and Portugal could also deliver a strong set of venues, but the event may now have outgrown the joint Denmark-Sweden candidacy.

For drama, with a series of late goals and penalty shootouts, this tournament was hard to beat. A levelling of standards and better coaching meant most games were tightly contested.

Of the 31 matches, 18 were either settled by one goal or drawn, including six of the seven knockout-round ties. Nine were won by three goals or more, but, of those, three involved European heavyweights – the Netherlands losing 4-0 to England and 5-2 to France, and Germany crashing 4-1 to Sweden. Only under-matched Wales were outclassed.

Tactically the sport continues to become more sophisticated, physically the players are fitter than ever, and both the officiating and goalkeeping, previous weaknesses, are much improved. The latter was highlighted by Germany's Ann-Katrin Berger's astonishing save to prevent a Janina Minge own-goal against France in the quarter-finals.

There are challenges to come, not least in ensuring that smaller, less resourced nations are not left behind. But the potential, and the impact, of the women's game was underlined when an estimated 65,000 fans watched England parade the trophy in central London along The Mall to Buckingham Palace.

As England captain Leah Williamson told the cheering crowd: "Stay with us, this story is not done yet."

WS Team of the Tournament

Drama defines knockout rounds

QUARTER-FINALS

A bonkers set of matches ended with the semi-final line-up being a near-replica of the 1997 finals, when Sweden, Germany, Italy and Spain reached the final four. For the latter two, it was the first time they had progressed this far since then, while for 2022 runners-up Germany it was business as usual – only once in their history have they failed to reach this stage.

Only England prevented an exact repeat of 28 years ago, as they somehow beat Sweden in Zurich. Deservedly trailing 2-0 with 12 minutes left after a sloppy first half, they forced extra-time through two goals in as many minutes from Lucy Bronze and Michelle Agyemang, then won a bizarre 14-penalty shootout 3-2.

Sweden keeper Jennifer Falk saved three England penalties but blazed over the bar the kick that would have won the tie. Into sudden death, Falk saved another but, after Sofia Jakobsson's kick was saved by Hannah Hampton, Bronze scored while teenager Smilla Holmberg shot over to send the holders through.

Opening scorer Kosovare Asllani, a fortnight short of her 36th birthday, could only watch from the bench in horror after being subbed off with a foot injury at 2-0 up.

The drama had begun a day earlier, when Italy's last-minute winner sunk Norway 2-1 in Geneva. Veteran Cristiana Girelli scored both goals, the second headed home from Sofia Cantore's perfect cross.

Italy, with Arianna Caruso and Manuela Giugliano also impressing, earned their win with Norway again failing to be the sum of their parts. Ada Hegerberg missed a penalty before scoring the equaliser, while Caroline Graham Hansen was anonymous. Guro Reiten, a makeshift left-back after Marit Bratberg Lund's late red card in the dead-rubber group game against Iceland, was exposed for both goals.

There were more missed spot-kicks the following night in Bern, from Mariona Caldentey and Alexia Putellas in normal time, but Spain still eased past a dogged Switzerland team, who kept them out for more than an hour but rarely looked like scoring themselves.

Onto Basel, and the best tie of the four. Veteran Germany defender Kathrin Hendrich was sent off after 13 minutes for inexplicably (in the age of VAR) pulling Griedge Mbock by the hair to concede a penalty – converted by Grace Geyoro.

Late winner...Italy star Cristiana Girelli celebrates scoring against Norway

Astonishing save... Ann-Katrin Berger prevents an own goal by her captain

Stepping up... Bonmati scores against Germany

Clutch Kelly... the forward celebrates putting England into the final

Yet Germany's ten, defending like women possessed, drew level through Sjoeke Nusken's near-post header from a corner, and could have won in normal time had she not then missed a penalty.

The match-winner was Ann-Katrin Berger. In extra-time the goalkeeper made an astonishing save to prevent a Janina Minge own-goal, then saved two penalties either side of scoring one herself to send Germany through 6-5 on penalties following another dramatic 14-shot shootout.

SEMI-FINALS

England were playing their sixth successive major tournament semi-final but it didn't look like it in Geneva as they again started slowly and enabled Italy to grow into the game.

The underdogs took the lead with a well-crafted and superbly executed goal from Barbara Bonansea after 33 minutes and, despite England laying siege to their goal, were still clinging to it deep into stoppage time.

Then teenage super-sub Aygemang, belatedly introduced in the 85th minute, did it again, breaking *Azzurre* hearts with a composed 96th-minute finish. She then nearly won it in extra-time, hitting the crossbar with a lob after displaying yet more individual brilliance.

Then, three minutes from another shootout, Emma Severini needlessly wrestled Beth Mead to the ground. Laura Giuliani saved Chloe Kelly's penalty, but the forward followed up to put a delirious and fortunate England through.

Spain had never previously beaten Germany, and for a long time in Zurich they must have wondered if they ever would as Christian Wuck's patched-up side, missing three of their first-choice back four, not only kept them at bay but created decent chances of their own.

While Berger was the busier keeper, Cata Coll had to make key saves too and penalties were looming when Aitana Bonmati stamped her class on the tie. A superb through-the-legs dummy as she received Athenea del Castillo's pass created space on the right, and as Berger readied for the cross she drilled a shot inside the near post.

Scorer and provider... Caldentey and Batlle celebrate Spain's opener in the final

FINAL

Basel hosted a repeat of the 2023 World Cup final and for nearly an hour it looked to be following the same script: Spain providing the inspiration and England the perspiration. But in keeping with the holders' Euros campaign, there was a plot twist ending with the tie being decided, perhaps inevitably, by a penalty shootout won by the unflappable Kelly.

England were playing their sixth successive major tournament semi-final – but it didn't look like it

An even start in which Spain, who appeared uncharacteristically nervous, offered England half-chances, gave way to Spanish dominance and Caldentey's thumping header from Ona Batlle's right-wing cross was a thin half-time reward for their supremacy.

The World Cup winners seemed to think possession and control would see them through but Alessia Russo's header from Kelly's cross cancelled out her Arsenal's team-mate's goal to force extra-time.

As Spain dominated, substitute Salma Paralluelo had a trio of chances to seal the deal but missed them all, leading to penalties. Coll saved from Beth Mead and Leah Williamson, but Hampton denied Caldentey, then Bonmati, while Paralluelo, her confidence seemingly shot, unsurprisingly missed.

Up stepped Kelly, match-winner in the 2022 final and shootout winner in the 2023 Finalissima. For once in England's rollercoaster campaign, there was never any doubt.

Group by group

GROUP A

Norway, as many expected, topped Group A, but were unconvincing in doing so despite winning every game. Although the opposition was modest, each victory was edged by a single goal and they failed to keep a clean sheet.

Perhaps the biggest positive was the emergence of Signe Gaupset, a 20-year-old Brann forward, who made two and scored two against Iceland on her first-ever major tournament start.

With top spot sewn up after two rounds, the drama was in who would follow Norway into the knockouts. In the decisive final match, Finland faced Switzerland in Geneva and looked to have secured their spot when they took the lead in the 79th minute through Natalia Kuikka's penalty. But the hosts rescued themselves in stoppage time, substitute Riola Xhemaili turning in Geraldine Reuteler's misdirected shot, to secure a precious point and the runners-spot ahead of Finland on goal difference.

It was tough on the Finns who had deservedly won the tournament's low-key opening game, beating Iceland 1-0 through Katariina Kosola's sweet strike, then been the better side against Norway.

Iceland came to the finals as the highest-ranked team in the group but on a dreadful run of form (ten matches without a win, before beating Serbia in their final warm-up match). They left without winning a single point, but did score three in defeat to an admittedly much-changed Norway.

Hosts' saviour... Riola Xhemaili celebrates after sending Switzerland into the last eight

GROUP B

World champions Spain laid down an impressive marker, thrashing Portugal 5-0 in their opening game and then following it up with a 6-2 drubbing of Belgium. After a 3-1 defeat of Italy, they finished the group with nine points and 14 goals.

Perhaps even more impressive was Aitana Bonmati's swift recovery from a bout of viral meningitis that put her in hospital less than a week before Spain's opening match. She recovered to make an appearance from the bench, and by the third match she was back to completing 90 minutes. Alongside her, Alexia Putellas looked back to her best with four assists and three goals while nine players hit the scoresheet in all. But title rivals could find a chink of hope in the fact that Spain looked

Spanish stars... Aitana Bonmati and Alexia Putellas

defensively suspect at times, conceding three goals.

Italy finished second, first beating Belgium in what was always likely to be the decisive match in the race for second. A late Portuguese equaliser in the second game left them in minor jeopardy ahead of the final round, but they played well against Spain and their goal-difference advantage over Portugal never looked like being reversed.

As it was, Belgium, already eliminated, defeated Portugal 2-1 to come third with the final standings accurately reflecting the group.

GROUP C

The top two were settled after two rounds with Germany and Sweden each beating Denmark and Poland. But with the group winner able to avoid Spain in the knockout rounds, both countries fielded strong teams in the final round.

Germany scored early, but within 30 minutes Sweden had replied with three goals – including a penalty for a goal-line handball that led to a red card for Carlotta Wamser. Down to ten, Germany could not respond and ultimately lost 4-1.

Red card offence... Germany's Carlotta Wamser handles on the goal line

Wamser was only playing because captain Giulia Gwinn suffered medial ligament damage in their opening game, a cruel blow for the full-back who missed the 2023 World Cup with an ACL injury.

It was a tough baptism for debutants Poland who were grateful for profligate German and Swedish finishing, and good goalkeeping from Kinga Szemik as they lost their opening games 2-0 and 3-0.

> Title rivals could find a chink of hope in the fact that Spain looked defensively suspect at times, conceding three goals

But to their delight and encouragement they concluded with a 3-2 win over a disappointing Danish side, who finished the group without a point. While hardly the ideal send-off for Manchester City-bound coach Andree Jeglertz, all three defeats were by a single goal including Germany's unfortunate and controversial winner: a Danish defender was prone after inadvertently blocking a clearance with her head.

GROUP D

England were given a wake-up call when France beat them, and much more convincingly than the 2-1 scoreline suggested. The holders, having been the first defending champions to lose their opening game, were in danger of being the first to exit after two games, with a patchy build-up adding to their concerns.

But Sarina Wieman tinkered with personnel and formation to outthink her home country in the next game. Her players tore the Netherlands apart, winning 4-0. Lauren James showed her class, while keeper Hannah Hampton's goal-making distribution underscored why Wiegman preferred her to Mary Earps in goal.

The Dutch threatened a revival when they led France 2-1 at half-time in the final game but, chasing the three-goal cushion that they needed to advance, they conceded four in the last 30 minutes and crashed out. France's attack of Delphine Cascarino, Marie-Antoinette Katoto and Sandy Baltimore, much to the fore against both England and the Netherlands, looked capable of troubling any team in the tournament.

Wales, making their major tournament bow, were outclassed in an unenviably tough group. While goals from Jess Fishlock and Hannah Cain were celebrated, they conceded 11 in three games – with the 6-1 loss to England especially painful.

France and England both scored 11 and moved into the knockout stages brimming with confidence.

Explosive attack ...France forward Delphine Cascarino

2025 WOMEN'S EUROPEAN CHAMPIONSHIP

BELGIUM

GOALKEEPERS

1	Nicky **EVRARD**	(30) 26.05.95	PSV (Ned)
12	Femke **BASTIAEN**	(24) 11.04.01	Utrecht (Ned)
21	Lisa **LICHTFUS**	(25) 28.12.99	Le Havre (Fra)

DEFENDERS

2	Davina **PHILTJENS**	(36) 26.02.89	Sassuolo (Ita)
4	Amber **TYSIAK**	(25) 26.01.00	West Ham United (Eng)
11	Janice **CAYMAN**	(36) 12.10.88	Leicester City (Eng)
16	Zenia **MERTENS**	(24) 27.02.01	OH Leuven
17	Jill **JANSSENS**	(21) 03.10.03	Hoffenheim (Ger)
18	Isabelle **ILIANO**	(28) 02.03.97	Club YLA
19	Sari **KEES**	(24) 17.02.01	Leicester City (Eng)
22	Laura **DELOOSE**	(32) 18.06.93	Anderlecht

MIDFIELDERS

5	Sarah **WIJNANTS**	(25) 13.10.99	Anderlecht
6	Tine **DE CAIGNY**	(28) 09.06.97	Anderlecht
8	Jarne **TEULINGS**	(23) 11.01.02	Feyenoord (Ned)
10	Justine **VANHAEVERMAET**	(33) 29.04.92	Everton (Eng)
13	Elena **DHONT**	(27) 27.03.98	Sassuolo (Ita)
20	Marie **DETRUYER**	(21) 13.01.04	Internazionale (Ita)
23	Kassandra **MISSIPO**	(27) 03.02.98	Sassuolo (Ita)

FORWARDS

3	Ella **VAN KERKHOVEN**	(31) 20.11.93	Feyenoord (Ned)
7	Hannah **EURLINGS**	(22) 01.01.03	OH Leuven
9	Tessa **WULLAERT**	(32) 19.03.93	Internazionale (Ita)
14	Jassina **BLOM**	(30) 03.09.94	Tenerife (Spa)
15	Mariam **TOLOBA**	(25) 20.09.99	Standard Liege

COACH

Elisabet **GUNNARSDOTTIR** (Isl) (48) 02.10.76

DENMARK

GOALKEEPERS

1	Maja Bay **ØSTERGAARD**	(27) 28.03.98	Vaxjo DFF (Swe)
16	Kathrine **LARSEN**	(32) 05.05.93	Sampdoria (Ita)
22	Alberte **VINGUM**	(20) 14.11.04	HB Koge

DEFENDERS

2	Sara **THRIGE**	(29) 15.05.96	PSV (Ned)
3	Stine **BALLISAGER**	(31) 03.01.94	Fiorentina (Ita)
4	Emma **FARGE**	(24) 06.12.00	Fiorentina (Ita)
5	Isabella **OBAZE**	(22) 30.10.02	Portland Thorns (USA)
7	Sanne **TROELSGAARD**	(36) 15.08.88	Roma (Ita)
11	Katrine **VEJE**	(34) 19.06.91	Crystal Palace (Eng)
15	Frederikke **THOGERSEN**	(29) 24.07.95	Roma (Ita)
18	Sara **HOLMGAARD**	(26) 28.01.99	Everton (Eng)

MIDFIELDERS

6	Karen **HOLMGAARD**	(26) 28.01.99	Everton (Eng)
8	Emma **SNERLE**	(24) 23.03.01	Fiorentina (Ita)
12	Kathrine **KUHL**	(21) 05.07.03	Roma (Ita)
13	Josefine **HASBO**	(23) 20.11.01	Gotham FC (USA)
17	Rikke **MADSEN**	(27) 09.08.97	Everton (Eng)
19	Janni **THOMSEN**	(25) 16.02.00	Utah Royals (USA)

FORWARDS

9	Nadia **NADIM**	(37) 02.01.88	Hammarby (Swe)
10	Pernille **HARDER**	(32) 15.11.92	Bayern Munich (Ger)
14	Sofie **BREDGAARD**	(23) 18.01.02	Fiorentina (Ita)
20	Signe **BRUUN**	(27) 06.04.98	Real Madrid (Spa)
21	Amalie **VANGSGAARD**	(28) 29.11.96	Juventus (Ita)
23	Cornelia **KRAMER**	(22) 16.12.02	Bayer Leverkusen (Ger)

COACH

Andree **JEGLERTZ** (Swe) (53) 14.02.72

ENGLAND

GOALKEEPERS

1	Hannah **HAMPTON**	(24) 16.11.00	Chelsea
13	Anna **MOORHOUSE**	(30) 30.03.95	Orlando Pride (USA)
21	Khiara **KEATING**	(21) 27.06.04	Manchester City

DEFENDERS

2	Lucy **BRONZE**	(33) 28.10.91	Chelsea
3	Niamh **CHARLES**	(26) 21.06.99	Chelsea
5	Alex **GREENWOOD**	(31) 07.09.93	Manchester City
6	Leah **WILLIAMSON**	(28) 29.03.97	Arsenal
12	Maya **LE TISSIER**	(23) 18.04.02	Manchester United
15	Esme **MORGAN**	(24) 18.10.00	Washington Spirit (USA)
16	Jess **CARTER**	(27) 27.10.97	Gotham FC (USA)
22	Lotte **WUBBEN-MOY**	(26) 11.01.99	Arsenal

MIDFIELDERS

4	Keira **WALSH**	(28) 08.04.97	Chelsea
8	Georgia **STANWAY**	(26) 03.01.99	Bayern Munich (Ger)
10	Ella **TOONE**	(25) 02.09.99	Manchester United
14	Grace **CLINTON**	(22) 31.03.03	Manchester United
20	Jess **PARK**	(23) 21.10.01	Manchester City

FORWARDS

7	Lauren **JAMES**	(23) 29.09.01	Chelsea
9	Beth **MEAD**	(30) 09.05.95	Arsenal
11	Lauren **HEMP**	(24) 07.08.00	Manchester City
17	Michelle **AGYEMANG**	(19) 03.02.06	Brighton & Hove Albion
18	Chloe **KELLY**	(27) 15.01.98	Arsenal
19	Aggie **BEEVER-JONES**	(21) 27.07.03	Chelsea
23	Alessia **RUSSO**	(26) 08.02.99	Arsenal

COACH

Sarina **WIEGMAN** (Ned) (55) 26.10.69

FINLAND

GOALKEEPERS

1	Anna **KOIVUNEN**	(23) 06.11.01	Djurgarden (Swe)
12	Anna **TAMMINEN**	(30) 30.10.94	Hammarby (Swe)
23	Tinja-Riikka **KORPELA**	(39) 05.05.86	Servette (Sui)

DEFENDERS

3	Eva **NYSTROM**	(25) 29.11.99	West Ham United (Eng)
5	Emma **KOIVISTO**	(30) 25.09.94	Milan (Ita)
6	Joanna **TYNNILA**	(23) 01.09.01	Brann (Nor)
7	Anni **HARTIKAINEN**	(21) 19.08.03	Rosengard (Swe)
10	Emmi **SIREN**	(24) 23.02.01	Nordsjalland (Den)
15	Natalia **KUIKKA**	(29) 01.12.95	Chicago Stars (USA)
16	Nea **LEHTOLA**	(26) 24.10.98	Brann (Nor)
19	Maaria **ROTH**	(28) 13.06.97	HJK

MIDFIELDERS

2	Vilma **KOIVISTO**	(22) 21.11.02	Linkoping (Swe)
4	Ria **OLING**	(30) 15.09.94	Crystal Palace (Eng)
8	Olga **AHTINEN**	(27) 15.08.97	Tottenham Hotspur (Eng)
9	Katariina **KOSOLA**	(24) 24.02.01	Malmo (Swe)
11	Nora **HEROUM**	(30) 20.07.94	Sampdoria (Ita)
13	Oona **SIREN**	(24) 23.02.01	West Ham United (Eng)
20	Eveliina **SUMMANEN**	(27) 29.05.98	Tottenham Hotspur (Eng)

FORWARDS

14	Heidi **KOLLANEN**	(28) 06.06.97	Vittsjo GIK (Swe)
17	Sanni **FRANSSI**	(30) 19.03.95	Real Sociedad (Spa)
18	Linda **SALLSTROM**	(36) 13.07.88	Vittsjo GIK (Swe)
21	Oona **SEVENIUS**	(21) 28.04.04	Rosengard (Swe)
22	Jutta **RANTALA**	(25) 11.11.99	Leicester City (Eng)

COACH

Marko **SALORANTA** (53) 31.03.72

FRANCE

GOALKEEPERS

1	Justine **LEROND**	(25) 29.02.00	Montpellier
16	Pauline **PEYRAUD-MAGNIN**	(33) 17.03.92	Juventus (Ita)
21	Constance **PICAUD**	(26) 05.07.98	Fleury

DEFENDERS

2	Maelle **LAKRAR**	(25) 27.05.00	Real Madrid (Spa)
3	Thiniba **SAMOURA**	(21) 11.02.04	Paris Saint-Germain
4	Alice **SOMBATH**	(21) 16.10.03	Lyon
5	Elisa **DE ALMEIDA**	(27) 11.01.98	Paris Saint-Germain
13	Selma **BACHA**	(24) 09.11.00	Lyon
19	Griedge Mbock **BATHY**	(30) 26.02.95	Paris Saint-Germain
22	Melween **N'DONGALA**	(20) 06.09.04	Paris FC
23	Lou **BOGAERT**	(21) 25.06.04	Paris FC

MIDFIELDERS

6	Sandie **TOLETTI**	(29) 13.07.95	Real Madrid (Spa)
7	Sakina **KARCHAOUI**	(29) 26.01.96	Paris Saint-Germain
8	Grace **GEYORO**	(28) 02.07.97	Paris Saint-Germain
10	Amel **MAJRI**	(32) 25.01.93	Lyon
18	Oriane **JEAN-FRANCOIS**	(23) 14.08.01	Chelsea (Eng)

FORWARDS

9	Melvine **MALARD**	(25) 28.06.00	Manchester United (Eng)
11	Kadidiatou **DIANI**	(30) 01.04.95	Lyon
12	Marie-Antoinette **KATOTO**	(26) 01.11.98	Paris Saint-Germain
14	Clara **MATEO**	(27) 28.11.97	Paris FC
15	Kelly **GAGO**	(26) 05.01.99	Everton (Eng)
17	Sandy **BALTIMORE**	(25) 19.02.00	Chelsea (Eng)
20	Delphine **CASCARINO**	(28) 05.02.97	San Diego Wave (USA)

COACH

Laurent **BONADEI** (55) 03.11.69

GERMANY

GOALKEEPERS

1	Ann-Katrin **BERGER**	(34) 09.10.90	Gotham FC (USA)
12	Stina **JOHANNES**	(25) 23.01.00	Eintracht Frankfurt
21	Ena **MAHMUTOVIC**	(21) 23.12.03	Bayern Munich

DEFENDERS

2	Sarai **LINDER**	(25) 26.10.99	Wolfsburg
3	Kathrin **HENDRICH**	(33) 06.04.92	Wolfsburg
4	Rebecca **KNAAK**	(29) 23.06.96	Manchester City (Eng)
5	Carlotta **WAMSER**	(21) 01.11.03	Eintracht Frankfurt
6	Janina **MINGE**	(26) 11.06.99	Wolfsburg
7	Giulia **GWINN**	(26) 02.07.99	Bayern Munich
17	Franziska **KETT**	(20) 24.10.04	Bayern Munich
23	Sophia **KLEINHERNE**	(25) 12.04.00	Eintracht Frankfurt

MIDFIELDERS

8	Sydney **LOHMANN**	(25) 19.06.00	Bayern Munich
9	Sjoeke **NUSKEN**	(24) 22.01.01	Chelsea (Eng)
13	Sara **DABRITZ**	(30) 15.02.95	Lyon (Fra)
16	Linda **DALLMANN**	(30) 02.09.94	Bayern Munich
20	Elisa **SENSS**	(28) 10.01.97	Eintracht Frankfurt
22	Jule **BRAND**	(22) 16.10.02	Wolfsburg

FORWARDS

10	Laura **FREIGANG**	(27) 01.02.98	Eintracht Frankfurt
11	Lea **SCHULLER**	(27) 12.11.97	Bayern Munich
14	Cora **ZICAI**	(20) 29.11.04	Freiburg
15	Selina **CERCI**	(25) 31.05.00	Hoffenheim
18	Giovanna **HOFFMANN**	(26) 20.09.98	RB Leipzig
19	Klara **BUHL**	(24) 07.12.00	Bayern Munich

COACH

Christian **WUCK** (52) 09.06.73

ICELAND

GOALKEEPERS

1	Cecilia Ran **RUNARSDOTTIR**	(21) 26.07.03	Internazionale (Ita)
12	Telma **IVARSDOTTIR**	(26) 30.03.99	Breidablik
13	Fanney Inga **BIRKISDOTTIR**	(20) 17.03.05	BK Hacken (Swe)

DEFENDERS

4	Glodis Perla **VIGGOSDOTTIR**	(30) 27.06.95	Bayern Munich (Ger)
5	Sadis Run **HEIDARSDOTTIR**	(20) 16.09.04	Valerenga (Nor)
6	Ingibjorg **SIGURDARDOTTIR**	(27) 07.10.97	Brondby (Den)
11	Natasha **ANASI**	(33) 02.10.91	Valur
18	Gudrun **ARNARDOTTIR**	(29) 29.07.95	Rosengard (Swe)
19	Aslaug Munda **GUNNLAUGSDOTTIR**	(24) 02.06.01	Breidablik
20	Gudny **ARNADOTTIR**	(24) 29.07.00	Kristianstad (Swe)
21	Hafrun Rakel **HALLDORSDOTTIR**	(22) 01.10.02	Brondby (Den)

MIDFIELDERS

2	Berglind Ros **AGUSTSDOTTIR**	(29) 28.07.95	Valur
7	Karolina Lea **VILHJALMSDOTTIR**	(23) 08.08.01	Bayer Leverkusen (Ger)
8	Alexandra **JOHANNSDOTTIR**	(25) 19.03.00	Kristianstad (Swe)
10	Dagny **BRYNJARSDOTTIR**	(33) 10.08.91	West Ham United (Eng)
15	Katla **TRYGGVADOTTIR**	(20) 05.05.05	Kristianstad (Swe)
16	Hildur **ANTONSDOTTIR**	(29) 18.09.95	Madrid CFF (Spa)
17	Agla Maria **ALBERTSDOTTIR**	(25) 05.08.99	Breidablik
22	Amanda **ANDRADOTTIR**	(21) 18.12.03	Twente (Ned)

FORWARDS

3	Sandra **JESSEN**	(30) 18.01.95	Thor/KA
9	Dilja Yr **ZOMERS**	(23) 11.11.01	OH Leuven (Bel)
14	Hlin **EIRIKSDOTTIR**	(25) 12.06.00	Leicester City (Eng)
23	Sveindis Jane **JONSDOTTIR**	(24) 05.06.01	Wolfsburg (Ger)

COACH

Thorsteinn **HALLDORSSON** (57) 07.01.68

ITALY

GOALKEEPERS

1	Laura **GIULIANI**	(32) 06.06.93	Milan
12	Rachele **BALDI**	(30) 02.10.94	Internazionale
22	Francesca **DURANTE**	(28) 12.02.97	Fiorentina

DEFENDERS

2	Elisabetta **OLIVIERO**	(27) 18.07.97	Lazio
3	Lucia Di **GUGLIELMO**	(28) 26.06.97	Roma
5	Elena **LINARI**	(31) 15.04.94	Roma
13	Julie **PIGA**	(27) 12.01.98	Milan
17	Lisa **BOATTIN**	(28) 03.05.97	Juventus
19	Martina **LENZINI**	(26) 23.07.98	Juventus
23	Cecilia **SALVAI**	(31) 02.12.93	Juventus

MIDFIELDERS

4	Eva **SCHATZER**	(20) 16.01.05	Juventus
6	Manuela **GIUGLIANO**	(27) 18.08.97	Roma
8	Emma **SEVERINI**	(21) 18.07.03	Fiorentina
14	Valentina **BERGAMASCHI**	(28) 22.02.97	Juventus
15	Annamaria **SERTURINI**	(27) 13.05.98	Internazionale
16	Eleonora **GOLDONI**	(29) 16.02.96	Lazio
18	Arianna **CARUSO**	(25) 06.11.99	Bayern Munich (Ger)
20	Giada **GREGGI**	(25) 18.02.00	Roma

FORWARDS

7	Sofia **CANTORE**	(25) 04.08.99	Juventus
9	Martina **PIEMONTE**	(27) 07.11.97	Lazio
10	Cristiana **GIRELLI**	(35) 23.04.90	Juventus
11	Barbara **BONANSEA**	(34) 13.06.91	Juventus
21	Michela **CAMBIAGHI**	(29) 04.02.96	Internazionale

COACH

Andrea **SONCIN** (46) 05.09.78

NETHERLANDS

GOALKEEPERS

1	Daphne **VAN DOMSELAAR**	(25) 06.03.00	Arsenal (Eng)
16	Lize **KOP**	(27) 17.03.98	Tottenham Hotspur (Eng)
23	Danielle **DE JONG**	(22) 11.10.02	Twente

DEFENDERS

2	Lynn **WILMS**	(24) 03.10.00	Wolfsburg (Ger)
3	Caitlin **DIJKSTRA**	(26) 30.01.99	Wolfsburg (Ger)
4	Veerle **BUURMAN**	(19) 21.04.06	PSV
8	Sherida **SPITSE**	(35) 29.05.90	Ajax
18	Kerstin **CASPARIJ**	(24) 19.08.00	Manchester City (Eng)
20	Dominique **JANSSEN**	(30) 17.01.95	Manchester United (Eng)
22	Ilse **VAN DER ZANDEN**	(29) 25.07.95	Utrecht

MIDFIELDERS

6	Jill **ROORD**	(28) 22.04.97	Manchester City (Eng)
10	Danielle **VAN DE DONK**	(33) 05.08.91	Lyon (Fra)
14	Jackie **GROENEN**	(30) 17.12.94	Paris Saint-Germain (Fra)
17	Victoria **PELOVA**	(26) 03.06.99	Arsenal (Eng)
19	Wieke **KAPTEIN**	(19) 29.08.05	Chelsea (Eng)
21	Damaris **EGURROLA**	(25) 26.08.99	Lyon (Fra)

FORWARDS

5	Romee **LEUCHTER**	(24) 12.01.01	Paris Saint-Germain (Fra)
7	Lineth **BEERENSTEYN**	(28) 11.10.96	Wolfsburg (Ger)
9	Vivianne **MIEDEMA**	(28) 15.07.96	Manchester City (Eng)
11	Esmee **BRUGTS**	(21) 28.07.03	Barcelona (Spa)
12	Chasity **GRANT**	(24) 19.04.01	Aston Villa (Eng)
13	Renate **JANSEN**	(34) 07.12.90	PSV
15	Katja **SNOEIJS**	(28) 31.08.96	Everton (Eng)

COACH

Andries **JONKER**	(62) 22.09.62	

NORWAY

GOALKEEPERS

1	Cecilie **FISKERSTRAND**	(29) 20.03.96	Fiorentina (Ita)
12	Selma **PANENGSTUEN**	(22) 22.11.02	Brann
23	Aurora **MIKALSEN**	(29) 21.03.96	Cologne (Ger)

DEFENDERS

2	Marit Bratberg **LUND**	(27) 07.11.97	Benfica (Por)
3	Emilie **WOLDVIK**	(26) 08.01.99	Rosengard (Swe)
4	Tuva **HANSEN**	(27) 04.08.97	Bayern Munich (Ger)
5	Marthine **OSTENSTAD**	(24) 18.03.01	Brann
6	Maren **MJELDE**	(35) 06.11.89	Everton (Eng)
13	Thea **BJELDE**	(25) 05.06.00	Valerenga
16	Mathilde **HARVIKEN**	(23) 29.12.01	Juventus (Ita)

MIDFIELDERS

7	Ingrid Syrstad **ENGEN**	(27) 29.04.98	Barcelona (Spa)
8	Vilde **BOE RISA**	(29) 13.07.95	Atletico Madrid (Spa)
11	Guro **REITEN**	(30) 26.07.94	Chelsea (Eng)
15	Justine **KIELLAND**	(22) 22.11.02	Wolfsburg (Ger)
18	Frida **MAANUM**	(25) 16.07.99	Arsenal (Eng)
21	Lisa **NAALSUND**	(30) 11.06.95	Manchester United (Eng)
22	Signe **GAUPSET**	(20) 18.06.05	Brann

FORWARDS

9	Karina **SAVIK**	(29) 24.03.96	Valerenga
10	Caroline **GRAHAM HANSEN**	(30) 18.02.95	Barcelona (Spa)
14	Ada **HEGERBERG**	(29) 10.07.95	Lyon (Fra)
17	Celin **BIZET**	(23) 24.10.01	Manchester United (Eng)
19	Elisabeth **TERLAND**	(24) 28.06.01	Manchester United (Eng)
20	Synne **JENSEN**	(29) 15.02.96	Atletico Madrid (Spa)

COACH

Gemma **GRAINGER** (Eng)	(42) 17.07.82	

POLAND

GOALKEEPERS

1	Kinga **SZEMIK**	(28) 25.06.97	West Ham United (Eng)
12	Natalia **RADKIEWICZ**	(21) 08.08.03	Pogon Szczecin
22	Kinga **SEWERYN**	(20) 31.03.05	GKS Katowice

DEFENDERS

2	Martyna **WIANKOWSKA**	(28) 24.12.96	Cologne (Ger)
3	Wiktoria **ZIENIEWICZ**	(23) 09.05.02	Basel (Sui)
4	Paulina **DUDEK**	(28) 16.06.97	Paris Saint-Germain (Fra)
5	Oliwia **WOS**	(25) 15.08.99	Basel (Sui)
6	Sylwia **MATYSIK**	(28) 20.05.97	Cologne (Ger)
7	Malgorzata **MESJASZ**	(28) 12.06.97	Milan (Ita)
13	Emilia **SZYMCZAK**	(19) 17.06.06	Barcelona B (Spa)
20	Kayla **ADAMEK**	(30) 01.02.95	Ottawa Rapid (Can)

MIDFIELDERS

8	Ewelina **KAMCZYK**	(29) 22.02.96	Fleury (Fra)
11	Tanja **PAWOLLEK**	(26) 18.01.99	Eintracht Frankfurt (Ger)
14	Dominika **GRABOWSKA**	(26) 26.12.98	Hoffenheim (Ger)
15	Milena **KOKOSZ**	(23) 17.08.01	Asane (Nor)
17	Klaudia **SLOWINSKA**	(25) 13.08.99	GKS Katowice
23	Adriana **ACHCINSKA**	(23) 22.04.02	Cologne (Ger)

FORWARDS

9	Ewa **PAJOR**	(28) 03.12.96	Barcelona (Spa)
10	Weronika **ZAWISTOWSKA**	(25) 17.12.99	Bayern Munich (Ger)
16	Klaudia **JEDLINSKA**	(25) 09.02.00	Dijon (Fra)
18	Nadia **KREZYMAN**	(21) 22.06.04	Dijon (Fra)
19	Natalia **PADILLA**	(22) 06.11.02	Sevilla (Spa)
21	Paulina **TOMASIAK**	(23) 02.01.02	Gornik Leczna

COACH

Nina **PATALON**	(39) 20.01.86	

PORTUGAL

GOALKEEPERS

1	Ines **PEREIRA**	(26) 26.05.99	Deportivo La Coruna (Spa)
12	Patricia **MORAIS**	(33) 17.06.92	Braga
22	Sierra **COTA-YARDE**	(21) 04.07.03	AFC Toronto (Can)

DEFENDERS

2	Catarina **AMADO**	(25) 21.07.99	Benfica
3	Lucia **ALVES**	(27) 22.10.97	Benfica
4	Ana **SEICA**	(24) 25.03.01	Tigres UANL (Mex)
5	Joana **MARCHAO**	(28) 24.10.96	Servette (Sui)
9	Ana **BORGES**	(35) 15.06.90	Sporting
15	Carole **COSTA**	(35) 03.05.90	Benfica
18	Carolina **CORREIA**	(23) 03.04.02	Torreense
19	Diana **GOMES**	(26) 26.07.98	Sevilla (Spa)

MIDFIELDERS

6	Andreia **JACINTO**	(23) 08.06.02	Real Sociedad (Spa)
7	Kika **NAZARETH**	(22) 17.11.02	Barcelona (Spa)
8	Andreia **NORTON**	(28) 15.08.96	Benfica
11	Tatiana **PINTO**	(31) 28.03.94	Atletico Madrid (Spa)
13	Fatima **PINTO**	(29) 16.01.96	Sporting
14	Dolores **SILVA**	(33) 07.08.91	Braga
16	Andreia **FARIA**	(25) 19.04.00	Benfica
20	Beatriz **FONSECA**	(26) 15.09.98	Sporting

FORWARDS

10	Jessica **SILVA**	(30) 11.12.94	Gotham FC (USA)
17	Diana **SILVA**	(30) 04.06.95	Sporting
21	Ana **CAPETA**	(27) 22.12.97	Sporting
23	Telma **ENCARNACAO**	(23) 11.10.01	Sporting

COACH

Francisco **NETO**	(43) 11.07.81	

SPAIN

GOALKEEPERS

1	Esther **SULLASTRES**	(32) 20.03.93	Sevilla
13	Cata **COLL**	(24) 23.04.01	Barcelona
23	Adriana **NANCLARES**	(23) 09.05.02	Athletic Club

DEFENDERS

2	Ona **BATLLE**	(26) 10.06.99	Barcelona
3	Jana **FERNANDEZ**	(23) 18.02.02	Barcelona
4	Irene **PAREDES**	(33) 04.07.91	Barcelona
5	Maria **MENDEZ**	(24) 10.04.01	Real Madrid
7	Olga **CARMONA**	(25) 12.06.00	Real Madrid
14	Laia **ALEIXANDRI**	(24) 25.08.00	Manchester City (Eng)
15	Leila **OUAHABI**	(32) 22.03.93	Manchester City (Eng)

MIDFIELDERS

6	Aitana **BONMATI**	(27) 18.01.98	Barcelona
11	Alexia **PUTELLAS**	(31) 04.02.94	Barcelona
12	Patricia **GUIJARRO**	(27) 17.05.98	Barcelona
19	Vicky **LOPEZ**	(18) 26.07.06	Barcelona
22	Maite **ZUBIETA**	(23) 28.05.02	Athletic Club

FORWARDS

8	Mariona **CALDENTEY**	(29) 19.03.96	Arsenal (Eng)
9	Esther **GONZALEZ**	(32) 08.12.92	Gotham FC (USA)
10	Athenea **DEL CASTILLO**	(24) 24.10.00	Real Madrid
16	Cristina **MARTIN-PRIETO**	(32) 14.03.93	Benfica (Por)
17	Lucia **GARCIA**	(26) 14.07.98	Monterrey (Mex)
18	Salma **PARALLUELO**	(21) 13.11.03	Barcelona
20	Claudia **PINA**	(23) 12.08.01	Barcelona
21	Alba **REDONDO**	(28) 27.08.96	Real Madrid

COACH

Montse **TOME**	(43) 11.05.82	

SWEDEN

GOALKEEPERS

1	Emma **HOLMGREN**	(28) 13.05.97	Levante (Spa)
12	Jennifer **FALK**	(32) 26.04.93	BK Hacken
21	Tove **ENBLOM**	(30) 20.11.94	Valerenga (Nor)

DEFENDERS

2	Jonna **ANDERSSON**	(32) 02.01.93	Linkoping
3	Linda **SEMBRANT**	(38) 15.05.87	Bayern Munich (Ger)
4	Hanna **LUNDKVIST**	(22) 17.07.02	San Diego Wave (USA)
5	Amanda **NILDEN**	(26) 07.08.98	Tottenham Hotspur (Eng)
6	Magdalena **ERIKSSON**	(31) 08.09.93	Bayern Munich (Ger)
13	Amanda **ILESTEDT**	(32) 17.01.93	Arsenal (Eng)
14	Nathalie **BJORN**	(28) 04.05.97	Chelsea (Eng)
22	Smilla **HOLMBERG**	(18) 11.10.06	Hammarby

MIDFIELDERS

7	Madelen **JANOGY**	(29) 12.11.95	Fiorentina (Ita)
9	Kosovare **ASLLANI**	(35) 29.07.89	London City Lionesses (Eng)
10	Sofia **JAKOBSSON**	(35) 23.04.90	London City Lionesses (Eng)
15	Julia **ZIGIOTTI OLME**	(27) 24.12.97	Bayern Munich (Ger)
16	Filippa **ANGELDAHL**	(27) 14.07.97	Real Madrid (Spa)
20	Hanna **BENNISON**	(22) 16.10.02	Juventus (Ita)

FORWARDS

8	Lina **HURTIG**	(29) 05.09.95	Arsenal (Eng)
11	Stina **BLACKSTENIUS**	(29) 05.02.96	Arsenal (Eng)
17	Ellen **WANGERHEIM**	(20) 01.09.04	Hammarby
18	Fridolina **ROLFO**	(31) 24.11.93	Barcelona (Spa)
19	Johanna Rytting **KANERYD**	(28) 12.02.97	Chelsea (Eng)
23	Rebecka **BLOMQVIST**	(27) 24.07.97	Wolfsburg (Ger)

COACH

Peter **GERHARDSSON**	(65) 22.08.59	

SWITZERLAND

GOALKEEPERS

1	Elvira **HERZOG**	(25) 05.03.00	RB Leipzig (Ger)
12	Livia **PENG**	(23) 14.03.02	Werder Bremen (Ger)
21	Nadine **BOHI**	(22) 21.11.02	St Gallen

DEFENDERS

2	Julia **STIERLI**	(28) 03.04.97	Freiburg (Ger)
5	Noelle **MARITZ**	(29) 23.12.95	Aston Villa (Eng)
8	Nadine **RIESEN**	(25) 11.04.00	Eintracht Frankfurt (Ger)
9	Ana-Maria **CRNOGORCEVIC**	(34) 03.10.90	Seattle Reign (USA)
15	Laia **BALLESTE**	(26) 22.02.99	Espanyol (Spa)
18	Viola **CALLIGARIS**	(29) 17.03.96	Juventus (Ita)

MIDFIELDERS

4	Noemi **IVELJ**	(18) 01.11.06	Grasshoppers
6	Geraldine **REUTELER**	(26) 21.04.99	Eintracht Frankfurt (Ger)
7	Riola **XHEMAILI**	(22) 05.03.03	PSV (Ned)
11	Coumba **SOW**	(30) 27.08.94	Basel
13	Lia **WALTI**	(32) 19.04.93	Arsenal (Eng)
14	Smilla **VALLOTTO**	(21) 23.03.04	Hammarby (Swe)
16	Sandrine **MAURON**	(28) 19.12.96	Servette

FORWARDS

3	Leila **WANDELER**	(19) 11.04.06	Lyon (Fra)
10	Meriame **TERCHOUN**	(29) 27.10.95	Dijon (Fra)
17	Svenja **FOLMLI**	(22) 19.08.02	Freiburg (Ger)
19	Iman **BENEY**	(18) 23.07.06	Young Boys
20	Alayah **PILGRIM**	(22) 29.04.03	Roma (Ita)
22	Sydney **SCHERTENLEIB**	(18) 30.01.07	Barcelona (Spa)
23	Alisha **LEHMANN**	(26) 21.01.99	Juventus (Ita)

COACH

Pia **SUNDHAGE** (Swe)	(65) 13.02.60	

WALES

GOALKEEPERS

1	Olivia **CLARK**	(23) 30.08.01	Leicester City (Eng)
12	Poppy **SOPER***	(23) 04.05.02	Blackburn Rovers (Eng)
12	Soffia **KELLY***	(18) 06.03.07	Aston Villa (Eng)
21	Safia **MIDDLETON-PATEL**	(20) 21.09.04	Manchester United (Eng)

**Poppy Soper withdrew injured on July 12, replaced by Soffia Kelly*

DEFENDERS

2	Lily **WOODHAM**	(24) 03.09.00	Crystal Palace (Eng)
3	Gemma **EVANS**	(28) 01.08.96	Liverpool (Eng)
5	Rhiannon **ROBERTS**	(34) 30.08.90	Real Betis (Spa)
6	Josie **GREEN**	(32) 25.04.93	Crystal Palace (Eng)
14	Hayley **LADD**	(31) 06.10.93	Everton (Eng)
16	Charlie **ESTCOURT**	(27) 27.05.98	DC Power FC (USA)
18	Esther **MORGAN**	(22) 28.08.02	Sheffield United (Eng)
19	Ella **POWELL**	(25) 01.02.00	Bristol City (Eng)

MIDFIELDERS

4	Sophie **INGLE**	(33) 02.09.91	Chelsea (Eng)
7	Ceri **HOLLAND**	(27) 12.12.97	Liverpool (Eng)
8	Angharad **JAMES-TURNER**	(31) 01.06.94	Seattle Reign (USA)
10	Jess **FISHLOCK**	(38) 14.01.87	Seattle Reign (USA)
13	Rachel **ROWE**	(32) 13.09.92	Southampton (Eng)
17	Lois **JOEL**	(26) 02.06.99	Newcastle United (Eng)
22	Alice **GRIFFITHS**	(24) 22.01.01	Durham (Eng)

FORWARDS

9	Kayleigh **BARTON**	(37) 22.03.88	Charlton Athletic (Eng)
11	Hannah **CAIN**	(26) 11.02.99	Leicester City (Eng)
15	Elise **HUGHES**	(24) 15.04.01	Crystal Palace (Eng)
20	Carrie **JONES**	(21) 04.09.03	IFK Norrkoping (Swe)
23	Ffion **MORGAN**	(25) 11.05.00	Bristol City (Eng)

COACH

Rhian **WILKINSON** (Can)	(43) 12.05.82	

Ages as of tournament kick-off date (June 14) and clubs as per 2024–25 season

Asia

JOHN DUERDEN

Preview

Saudi dominance set to grow in Asia's Elite competition

The burning question ahead of the upcoming AFC Champions League Elite campaign is: can anyone stop the Saudi Arabian clubs?

It's not just that the Saudi Pro League clubs have significantly deeper pockets and bigger stars than the rest of Asia, but also that all the games from the quarter-finals will take place in Saudi Arabia. If Real Madrid and Manchester City can't beat Al Hilal, then what chance do clubs from Iraq, Uzbekistan and Malaysia have?

In the last edition, which ended in May, all three of the Kingdom's clubs (owned by the country's Public Investment Fund – having these in the same tournament doesn't seem to be a big problem for the Asian Football Confederation, unlike UEFA and its rules and regulations around multi-club ownership) reached the last four. Al Ahli knocked out four-time winners Al Hilal to reach the final and beat a Kawasaki Frontale team that had seen off Al Nassr in the other last-four clash. The Saudi trio finished first, second and third in the league phase, winning 19 and losing just one of their combined 24 games. Ahli and Hilal are back this time around, with domestic champions Al Ittihad replacing Nassr.

Whether Hilal's Club World Cup proves to be a boost to their competitiveness or a drain on their energy levels as the season progresses will be interesting to watch. For new coach Simone Inzaghi, beaten in two UEFA Champions League finals with Internazionale, victory will be the target.

This is the second edition of the tournament since the word "Elite" was added and 16 teams were removed.

Reigning champions ...Al Ahli won last season's crown

Point to prove ...Al Hilal coach Simone Inzaghi

Ten groups of four became two groups of 12, divided into west and eastern Asia. In this first stage, each team plays eight games and the top eight go through to the second round, home and away games played in their respective zones, before moving to Saudi Arabia to play the rest.

That makes a tough task tougher for all, especially those from the east.

> In the last edition, which ended in May, all three of the Kingdom's clubs reached the last four

Compared to the three Saudi teams who have seven continental titles between them, in the other group only Ulsan HD of South Korea have lifted the trophy before. Given that in the last tournament the Tigers won one and lost six (and then all three at the Club World Cup), hopes are not high. FC Seoul are back – with Jesse Lingard – while Gangwon FC, preparing for a first appearance, complete the Korean contingent.

Japan came the closest last time, though finalists Kawasaki have not made it back to try to go one better. Vissel Kobe are current domestic champions, reached the second round last time and have long held ambitions of being the best in Asia. Sanfrecce Hiroshima return but made little impact in Asia even when winning titles at home in the previous decade and, until 2024, Machida Zelvia had never even appeared in Japan's top flight. Their direct style caused problems for J. League clubs last season as they finished third, but it remains to be seen if the same is true for regional rivals.

The Chinese challenge is based on its biggest city. League champions Shanghai Port, led by coach Kevin Muscat, pipped Shanghai Shenhua, managed by former Russia boss Leonid Slutsky, to the domestic title. No Chinese Super League club has looked like challenging in Asia since Guangzhou Evergrande's triumphs in 2013 and 2015, led respectively by Marcello Lippi and Luiz Felipe Scolari, and it would be a surprise if either Shanghai club can go all the way.

Melbourne City are flying the flag for Australia and the City Football Group, while anyone in Southeast Asia would love to see one of the region's clubs reach the showpiece for the first time since the inaugural Champions League in 2003. Buriram United of Thailand and Malaysia's Johor Darul Ta'zim are familiar participants and have reached knockout stages but have yet to progress past the quarter-finals.

Over in the west, as well as the Saudi powers, there are three hopefuls from the United Arab Emirates, though two-time champions Al Ain are not one of them. Shabab Al Ahli were beaten finalists in 2015 but, along with Sharjah and Al Wahda, are going to have to raise their games if they are going to make it to the quarter-finals and beyond.

Maybe the challenge could come from elsewhere in the region. Al Sadd have been Asian champions twice and the Qatar Stars League champions have top talent – including former Liverpool striker Roberto Firmino – even if they don't quite have the spending power of the Saudi teams. The same is true of Al Gharafa, who have stars such as Spain striker Joselu and ex-Everton defender Mason Holgate. Iran are represented by Tractor SC, still celebrating a first league title, with Al Shorta standing up for Iraq. Uzbekistan's hopes lie with Nasaf.

The good news is that eight of the 12 will go through, the bad news is that Saudi Arabian teams look head and shoulders above anyone else, in the west and also the east.

Japanese champions... Vissel Kobe could offer the best challenge from the east

THE DRAW

WEST REGION

- Al Ahli
- Al Gharafa
- Al Hilal
- Al Ittihad
- Al Sadd
- Al Wahda
- Nasaf
- Shabab Al Ahli
- Sharjah
- Tractor
- Al Shorta
- Al Duhail

EAST REGION

- Buriram United
- FC Seoul
- Gangwon FC
- Johor Darul Ta'zim
- Machida Zelvia
- Melbourne City
- Sanfrecce Hiroshima
- Shanghai Port
- Shanghai Shenhua
- Ulsan HD
- Vissel Kobe
- Chengdu Rongcheng

Saudi Arabia

JOHN DUERDEN

Saudi Pro League returns

Attention will turn away from the transfer market and back to the pitch as the new Saudi Pro League season gets underway

As soon as the 2024-25 Saudi Pro League season finished in May with Karim Benzema lifting Al Ittihad's tenth league title, the headlines were focused on which stars were going to leave European clubs for those in Riyadh, Jeddah and Damman, and which of the big names already there would leave.

Whatever the changes on the pitch, the likelihood is that the "Big Four", owned by the Public Investment Fund, are going to dominate once again from August. There are, however, deep pockets elsewhere, with Al Qadsiah and newly-promoted Neom SC hoping to expand that exclusive club.

Perhaps the most intriguing move was that involving Jorge Jesus. The veteran Portuguese boss led Al Hilal to a dominant title in 2023-24, setting a new world-record winning streak of 34 along the way, but last season was not as impressive. Hilal lost the title and, towards the end, it seemed that Jesus had lost the players too. With weeks remaining, he lost his job. Soon after, the familiar silver mane was back in Riyadh as he took charge of bitter rivals Al Nassr to replace Stefan Pioli, the former Milan boss, who never really settled. It adds quite a twist to the new season.

Jesus will team up, of course, with Cristiano Ronaldo, the subject of another big summer story. After some intense speculation, the 40-year-old

Intriguing move ...former Al Hilal boss Jorge Jesus has taken charge of Al Nassr

Team to beat... Karim Benzema led Al Ittihad to the title last season

signed a new two-year deal. The coach is going to have to work out how to deal with a player who might be on course for 1,000 career goals but who doesn't move around that much any more. Jhon Duran, signed for over £60 million in January and who looked better when Ronaldo was absent, has left for Turkey. The big additions are Joao Felix, another Portuguese star, who arrived from Chelsea for £26.2m (though it could rise to £43.7m if all clauses are met) and Spain centre-back Inigo Martinez from Barcelona.

Al Ittihad are obviously the team to beat, deserved winners last time around. Coach Laurent Blanc has a settled side with Benzema, N'Golo Kante, Fabinho, Moussa Diaby, Steven Bergwijn and others, as well as a talented local contingent.

And what of Al Hilal, the darlings of the Club World Cup after beating Manchester City 4-3 on their way to a quarter-final exit? New coach Simone Inzaghi suggested that league title number 20 could be on the cards. France international left-back Theo Hernandez arrived from Milan for £21.3m, and Uruguay striker Darwin Nunez soon followed, a £46.3m signing from Liverpool. The record champions have shown enough in the past that they have what it takes to bounce back from disappointing seasons, and the new signings should help that.

Al Ahli ended what could have been a disappointing league season on a high with a first-ever title in Asia, winning the AFC Champions League in May. Roberto Firmino, the hero in the final victory, has left for Qatar, while Gabri Veiga (Porto) and Allan Saint-Maximin (Club America) have also exited. However, the growing relationship between Riyadh Mahrez and Ivan Toney bodes well for the new season, as does the addition of French attacking midfielder Enzo Millot, signed for £25.9m and one of the stars of the Stuttgart side that finished second in the Bundesliga in 2023-24. The challenge is now to jump from finishing fifth last time to a first league title since 2016 and fourth overall.

> The likelihood is that the "Big Four", owned by the Public Investment Fund, are going to dominate once again

Al Qadsiah, backed by oil giant Aramco, cracked the top four last season and just missed out on a place for continental football.

Still, fourth was impressive for a newly-promoted team, led by the goals of Julian Quinones and Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang. Unfortunately, the latter has returned to Marseille. That blow was tempered with the arrival of Mateo Retegui, the Italy international striker who arrived from Atalanta for a reported fee of just under £60m.

Neom SC are promoted, ambitious and also backed by PIF. The city that the team represents does not yet exist, the current home is 100 miles or so to the east in the city of Tabuk, but the ambition is real. Well-travelled Brazilian coach Pericles Chamusca's reward for getting out of the second tier was to be replaced by former Paris Saint-Germain manager Christophe Galtier. Neom won promotion on the back of some experienced Saudi Arabian players, and going up automatically turned Said Benrahma's loan spell into a permanent deal. New faces include former Arsenal striker Alexandre Lacazette (snapped up on a free transfer from Lyon), Poland goalkeeper Marcin Bulka (€15m from Nice) and France Under-21 defender Nathan Zeze (€20m from Nantes).

A top-four place may be too much too soon for Neom and it is likely the limit of ambitions for six-time champions Al Shabab. They finished sixth last time and will be looking to Yannick Carrasco and Daniel Podence to lead the challenge.

Ettifaq recovered after the departure of Steven Gerrard as head coach to take seventh, led by their inspirational captain Gini Wijnaldum who ended with 14 league goals, but like the others are likely to be looking up next May as one of the Big Four lift the league trophy.

Club World Cup heroes...Al Hilal impressed in the US and will be led by new head coach Simone Inzaghi

Scotland

STEVE MENARY

Football at the Island Games

Orkney hosted the 2025 edition of the Island Games, with Bermuda emerging as champions

Bermuda did the double at the 2025 Island Games football tournament on the Scottish island of Orkney.

The tournament was staged in Scotland for only the second time – having previously being held in Shetland in 2005 – but lack of accommodation forced the organisers to reduce places in an already oversubscribed men's tournament from 16 to 12. A number of sides then withdrew due to costly accommodation, including three-time winners Guernsey. Attempts to bring in late replacements were not successful, and the tournament went ahead with ten sides, which led to a complicated format.

Winners of the three groups qualified for the semi-finals with the fourth place going to the second-placed team with the best record. However, in the four-team Group A, results against the bottom side did not count.

The Norwegian Isle of Froya occupied that position after losing all three games, and the group went to the final game after 2017 winners the Isle of Man and hosts Orkney both won their first two games.

With the Manxmen putting ten goals past Froya, the hosts needed a win to guarantee qualification. Sean Doyle, who captains the Isle of Man side that plays in the North West Counties League, opened the scoring on 41 minutes and second-half goals from Tomas Brown and Daniel Pickering downed Orkney 3-1.

In Group B, the Shetland Islands were held to a goalless draw by Gozo, who were then knocked out after a volley from Robert Martins-Figueira and a delicate chip from Harrison Moon gave reigning champions Jersey a 2-0 win.

In the final game, Jersey raced into an early 2-0 lead against the 2005 winners. Lorn McNiven pulled a goal back and Jersey then lost Frank Tobin to a straight red card for a dangerous high challenge. The sides were soon evened up though, with Stuart Copland dismissed for the Shetlands and then Sam Maver thundering in a free-kick with eight minutes to go. But Jersey held on for a 2-2 draw and a semi-final place.

Group C also went to the final game after Bermuda's Under-23 side and Ynys Mon both beat the Western Isles. In another thriller, the Caribbean side faced elimination until a stoppage-time goal from Jakeem Jennings, who plays in the UK for Harborough Town, secured a 2-2 draw.

A point for the Welsh island was one more than Orkney and secured a semi-final against the Isle of Man, while Jersey took on Bermuda with both games taking place at the same time at the KGS Sports Centre in Kirkwall.

A Liam Morris penalty on 39 minutes took Ynys Mon – six-time finalists but winners only once, in 1999 – into the final against a Bermuda side that produced a sensational comeback, netting twice in the dying moments of extra-time to upset Jersey 3-2.

Kick-off in the final was delayed, but Jace Donawa and Mason Christopher put Bermuda ahead within the first 30 minutes. Sam Jones pulled one back in the second half and Ynys Mon chased an equaliser but substitute Andrew Armstrong sealed a 3-1 victory and a second gold after winning as hosts in 2013.

With Bermuda's women beating the Isle of Man 4-2 on penalties after a 1-1 draw in their final, the island sealed a memorable double.

> Lack of accommodation forced the organisers to reduce places in an already oversubscribed men's tournament

Island Games... action from the clash between Froya and Orkney
Photo credit: Orkney Photographic

Tales from the 211

Some of the more unusual records to be set in the 2025-26 club season

Europe's most remote club... Portuguese top-flight side Santa Clara

MOST REMOTE CLUB

Cut adrift in the mid-Atlantic, Santa Clara – based in Portugal's Azores archipelago – hold the unique distinction of being the most geographically isolated top-flight club in Europe. Almost 1,000km of ocean separate the islanders from Madeira outfit Nacional, their nearest domestic rival, while every other away game requires a 1,500km flight to the mainland, equating to more than one full lap of the planet over the course of the league season.

But the club has refused to let geography hold them back. They followed up promotion back to the Primeira Liga in the summer of 2024 with a fifth-place finish in the top flight last term, qualifying for Europe as a result. At the time of writing they remain in contention for a Conference League berth – if they qualify, they would be the most westerly team to ever play in a group phase of European competition.

LONGEST AWAY DAY

Based in an exclave between Lithuania and Poland, Baltika Kaliningrad face the toughest travel demands in the Russian Premier League. Every away trip begins with a flight to Moscow or Saint Petersburg, with a connection often then required to destinations elsewhere in the country. On top of that, the closure of airspace over the Baltic States means Baltika must fly via the North Sea corridor, adding to their travel time.

Judged by straight-line distance alone, however, Baltika are not involved in the Russian top flight's biggest away day in 2025-26. That distinction goes to Zenit v Dynamo Makhachkala, which will be the most distant domestic match-up in UEFA at 2,430km apart.

But even that pales in comparison with the away days in the second tier – SKA-Khabarovsk and Chernomorets Novorossiysk are separated by 6,912km and seven different times zones.

SMALLEST CLUB

Top-flight village clubs that punch above their weight are nothing new – take surprise Swedish Allsvenskan leaders Mjallby, whose home village of Hallevik has only 1,485 inhabitants (see page 27).

But a new contender has now emerged for the title of smallest top-flight club in a major UEFA nation. Polish team Bruk-Bet Termalica, who are based in the village of Nieciecza (population: 750), returned to the Ekstraklasa for a second stint at the top level this summer.

Until recently, the title of smallest European settlement with a top-flight club belonged to Loughgall in Northern Ireland, a tiny village in County Armagh with a population of just 282. But local club Loughgall FC's two-year stay in the Premiership came to an end last season.

Including micro-states, the smallest place currently hosting a top-tier team is the parish of San Giovanni sotto le Penne in San Marino – home to AS San Giovanni and only 30 residents.

OLDEST PLAYER

Legendary Japanese striker Kazu Miura, who started his playing career before the fall of the Iron Curtain, was widely labelled as Europe's oldest pro-footballer at any level when he signed for Oliveirense in Portugal's second tier aged 55 in 2023. But he is a relative youngster compared to Mykola Lykhovydov, who is still playing for Real Pharma in Ukraine's third tier at 59 and is – to the best of our knowledge – the oldest active professional player anywhere in the world.

Lykhovydov, who credits the spring water from an artesian well at the club's training ground as the secret of his eternal youth, initially wanted to continue playing until 50. But with his 60th birthday now fast approaching, he simply wants to keep going for as long as he can.

BEST REPRESENTED CITY

With nearly two-thirds of Iceland's population living in Greater Reykjavik, it is no surprise that eight of its 12 top-flight clubs are based there too. In fact, the Icelandic league is so capital-centric that teams can sometimes go months on end without leaving the city – KR, for instance, played 14 straight games in the capital region between April 14 and July 6.

Reykjavik is closely trailed in the ranking by London and Yerevan, which are each home to seven clubs in their respective top flights – the English and Armenian Premier Leagues.

Istanbul matches, involving seven teams in the Turkish Super Lig, is the most of any non-capital city in a UEFA nation. Uniquely, its clubs span two continents: Basaksehir, Besiktas, Eyupspor, Fatih Karagumruk, Kasimpasa and Galatasaray on the European side of the city, and Fenerbahce in Asia.

Lee Wingate

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Inter-continental rivals...Fenerbahce v Galatasaray

PREMIER LEAGUE FIXTURES 2025-26

AUGUST 15
Liverpool v Bournemouth

AUGUST 16
Aston Villa v Newcastle United
Brighton v Fulham
Sunderland v West Ham United
Tottenham Hotspur v Burnley
Wolves v Manchester City

AUGUST 17
Chelsea v Crystal Palace
Nottingham Forest v Brentford
Manchester United v Arsenal

AUGUST 18
Leeds United v Everton

AUGUST 22
West Ham United v Chelsea

AUGUST 23
Manchester City v Tottenham Hotspur
Bournemouth v Wolves
Brentford v Aston Villa
Burnley v Sunderland
Arsenal v Leeds United

AUGUST 24
Crystal Palace v Nottingham Forest
Everton v Brighton
Fulham v Manchester United

AUGUST 25
Newcastle United v Liverpool

AUGUST 29
Aston Villa v Crystal Palace

AUGUST 30
Chelsea v Fulham
Manchester United v Burnley
Sunderland v Brentford
Tottenham Hotspur v Bournemouth
Wolves v Everton
Leeds United v Newcastle United

AUGUST 31
Brighton v Manchester City
Nottingham Forest v West Ham United
Liverpool v Arsenal

SEPTEMBER 13
Arsenal v Nottingham Forest
Bournemouth v Brighton
Crystal Palace v Sunderland
Everton v Aston Villa
Fulham v Leeds United
Newcastle United v Wolves
West Ham United v Tottenham Hotspur
Brentford v Chelsea

SEPTEMBER 14
Burnley v Liverpool
Manchester City v Manchester United

SEPTEMBER 20
Liverpool v Everton
Bournemouth v Newcastle United
Brighton v Tottenham Hotspur
Burnley v Nottingham Forest
West Ham United v Crystal Palace
Wolves v Leeds United
Manchester United v Chelsea
Fulham v Brentford

SEPTEMBER 21
Sunderland v Aston Villa
Arsenal v Manchester City

SEPTEMBER 27
Brentford v Manchester United
Aston Villa v Fulham
Chelsea v Brighton
Crystal Palace v Liverpool
Leeds United v Bournemouth
Manchester City v Burnley
Nottingham Forest v Sunderland

SEPTEMBER 28
Tottenham Hotspur v Wolves
Newcastle United v Arsenal

SEPTEMBER 29
Everton v West Ham United

OCTOBER 4
Arsenal v West Ham United
Aston Villa v Burnley
Bournemouth v Fulham
Brentford v Manchester City
Chelsea v Liverpool
Everton v Crystal Palace
Leeds United v Tottenham Hotspur
Manchester United v Sunderland
Newcastle United v Nottingham Forest
Wolves v Brighton

OCTOBER 18
Brighton v Newcastle United
Burnley v Leeds United
Crystal Palace v Bournemouth
Fulham v Arsenal
Liverpool v Manchester United
Manchester City v Everton
Nottingham Forest v Chelsea
Sunderland v Wolves
Tottenham Hotspur v Aston Villa
West Ham United v Brentford

OCTOBER 25
Arsenal v Crystal Palace
Aston Villa v Manchester City
Bournemouth v Nottingham Forest
Brentford v Liverpool
Chelsea v Sunderland
Everton v Tottenham Hotspur
Leeds United v West Ham United
Manchester United v Brighton
Newcastle United v Fulham
Wolves v Burnley

New ground...this is Everton's first season at Hill Dickinson Stadium

NOVEMBER 1
Brighton v Leeds United
Burnley v Arsenal
Crystal Palace v Brentford
Fulham v Wolves
Liverpool v Aston Villa
Manchester City v Bournemouth
Nottingham Forest v Manchester United
Sunderland v Everton
Tottenham Hotspur v Chelsea
West Ham United v Newcastle United

NOVEMBER 8
Aston Villa v Bournemouth
Brentford v Newcastle United
Chelsea v Wolves
Crystal Palace v Brighton
Everton v Fulham
Manchester City v Liverpool
Nottingham Forest v Leeds United
Sunderland v Arsenal
Tottenham Hotspur v Manchester United
West Ham United v Burnley

NOVEMBER 22
Arsenal v Tottenham Hotspur
Bournemouth v West Ham United
Brighton v Brentford
Burnley v Chelsea
Fulham v Sunderland
Leeds United v Aston Villa
Liverpool v Nottingham Forest
Manchester United v Everton
Newcastle United v Manchester City
Wolves v Crystal Palace

NOVEMBER 29
Aston Villa v Wolves
Brentford v Burnley
Chelsea v Arsenal
Crystal Palace v Manchester United
Everton v Newcastle United
Manchester City v Leeds United
Nottingham Forest v Brighton
Sunderland v Bournemouth
Tottenham Hotspur v Fulham
West Ham United v Liverpool

DECEMBER 3
Arsenal v Brentford
Bournemouth v Everton
Brighton v Aston Villa
Burnley v Crystal Palace
Fulham v Manchester City
Leeds United v Chelsea
Liverpool v Sunderland
Manchester United v West Ham United
Newcastle United v Tottenham Hotspur
Wolves v Nottingham Forest

DECEMBER 6
Aston Villa v Arsenal
Bournemouth v Chelsea
Brighton v West Ham United
Everton v Nottingham Forest
Fulham v Crystal Palace
Leeds United v Liverpool
Manchester City v Sunderland
Newcastle United v Burnley
Tottenham Hotspur v Brentford
Wolves v Manchester United

DECEMBER 13
Arsenal v Wolves
Brentford v Leeds United
Burnley v Fulham
Chelsea v Everton
Crystal Palace v Manchester City
Liverpool v Brighton
Manchester United v Bournemouth
Nottingham Forest v Tottenham Hotspur
Sunderland v Newcastle United
West Ham United v Aston Villa

DECEMBER 20
Aston Villa v Manchester United
Bournemouth v Burnley
Brighton & Hove Albion v Sunderland
Everton v Arsenal
Fulham v Nottingham Forest
Leeds United v Crystal Palace
Manchester City v West Ham United
Newcastle United v Chelsea
Tottenham Hotspur v Liverpool
Wolves v Brentford

DECEMBER 27
Arsenal v Brighton
Brentford v Bournemouth
Burnley v Everton
Chelsea v Aston Villa
Crystal Palace v Tottenham Hotspur
Liverpool v Wolves

North London derby... Arsenal take on rivals Spurs at the Emirates Stadium in November

Manchester United v Newcastle United
Nottingham Forest v Manchester City
Sunderland v Leeds United
West Ham United v Fulham

DECEMBER 30

Arsenal v Aston Villa
Brentford v Tottenham Hotspur
Burnley v Newcastle United
Chelsea v Bournemouth
Crystal Palace v Fulham
Liverpool v Leeds United
Manchester United v Wolves
Nottingham Forest v Everton
Sunderland v Manchester City
West Ham United v Brighton

JANUARY 3

Aston Villa v Nottingham Forest
Bournemouth v Arsenal
Brighton v Burnley
Everton v Brentford
Fulham v Liverpool
Leeds United v Manchester United
Manchester City v Chelsea
Newcastle United v Crystal Palace
Tottenham Hotspur v Sunderland
Wolves v West Ham United

JANUARY 7

Arsenal v Liverpool
Bournemouth v Tottenham Hotspur
Brentford v Sunderland
Burnley v Manchester United
Crystal Palace v Aston Villa
Everton v Wolves
Fulham v Chelsea
Manchester City v Brighton
Newcastle United v Leeds United
West Ham United v Nottingham Forest

JANUARY 17

Aston Villa v Everton
Brighton v Bournemouth
Chelsea v Brentford
Leeds United v Fulham
Liverpool v Burnley
Manchester United v Manchester City
Nottingham Forest v Arsenal
Sunderland v Crystal Palace
Tottenham Hotspur v West Ham United
Wolves v Newcastle United

JANUARY 24

Arsenal v Manchester United
Bournemouth v Liverpool
Brentford v Nottingham Forest
Burnley v Tottenham Hotspur
Crystal Palace v Chelsea
Everton v Leeds United
Fulham v Brighton
Manchester City v Wolves
Newcastle United v Aston Villa
West Ham United v Sunderland

JANUARY 31

Aston Villa v Brentford
Brighton v Everton
Chelsea v West Ham United
Leeds United v Arsenal
Liverpool v Newcastle United
Manchester United v Fulham
Nottingham Forest v Crystal Palace
Sunderland v Burnley
Tottenham Hotspur v Manchester City
Wolves v Bournemouth

FEBRUARY 7

Arsenal v Sunderland
Bournemouth v Aston Villa
Brighton v Crystal Palace
Burnley v West Ham United
Fulham v Everton
Leeds United v Nottingham Forest
Liverpool v Manchester City
Manchester United v Tottenham Hotspur
Newcastle United v Brentford
Wolves v Chelsea

FEBRUARY 11

Aston Villa v Brighton
Brentford v Arsenal
Chelsea v Leeds United
Crystal Palace v Burnley
Everton v Bournemouth
Manchester City v Fulham
Nottingham Forest v Wolves
Sunderland v Liverpool
Tottenham Hotspur v Newcastle United
West Ham United v Manchester United

FEBRUARY 21

Aston Villa v Leeds United
Brentford v Brighton
Chelsea v Burnley
Crystal Palace v Wolves
Everton v Manchester United
Manchester City v Newcastle United
Nottingham Forest v Liverpool
Sunderland v Fulham
Tottenham Hotspur v Arsenal
West Ham United v Bournemouth

FEBRUARY 28

Arsenal v Chelsea
Bournemouth v Sunderland
Brighton v Nottingham Forest
Burnley v Brentford
Fulham v Tottenham Hotspur
Leeds United v Manchester City
Liverpool v West Ham United
Manchester United v Crystal Palace
Newcastle United v Everton
Wolves v Aston Villa

MARCH 4

Aston Villa v Chelsea
Bournemouth v Brentford
Brighton v Arsenal
Everton v Burnley
Fulham v West Ham United
Leeds United v Sunderland
Manchester City v Nottingham Forest
Newcastle United v Manchester United
Tottenham Hotspur v Crystal Palace
Wolves v Liverpool

MARCH 14

Arsenal v Everton
Brentford v Wolves
Burnley v Bournemouth
Chelsea v Newcastle United
Crystal Palace v Leeds United
Liverpool v Tottenham Hotspur
Manchester United v Aston Villa
Nottingham Forest v Fulham
Sunderland v Brighton
West Ham United v Manchester City

MARCH 21

Aston Villa v West Ham United
Bournemouth v Manchester United
Brighton v Liverpool
Everton v Chelsea
Fulham v Burnley
Leeds United v Brentford
Manchester City v Crystal Palace
Newcastle United v Sunderland
Tottenham Hotspur v Nottingham Forest
Wolves v Arsenal

Manchester derby... City boss Guardiola and United gaffer Amorim will face-off in mid-January

APRIL 11

Arsenal v Bournemouth
Brentford v Everton
Burnley v Brighton
Chelsea v Manchester City
Crystal Palace v Newcastle United
Liverpool v Fulham
Manchester United v Leeds United
Nottingham Forest v Aston Villa
Sunderland v Tottenham Hotspur
West Ham United v Wolves

APRIL 18

Aston Villa v Sunderland
Brentford v Fulham
Chelsea v Manchester United
Crystal Palace v West Ham United
Everton v Liverpool
Leeds United v Wolves
Manchester City v Arsenal
Newcastle United v Bournemouth
Nottingham Forest v Burnley
Tottenham Hotspur v Brighton

APRIL 25

Arsenal v Newcastle United
Bournemouth v Leeds United
Brighton v Chelsea
Burnley v Manchester City
Fulham v Aston Villa
Liverpool v Crystal Palace
Manchester United v Brentford
Sunderland v Nottingham Forest
West Ham United v Everton
Wolves v Tottenham Hotspur

MAY 2

Arsenal v Fulham
Aston Villa v Tottenham Hotspur
Bournemouth v Crystal Palace
Brentford v West Ham United
Chelsea v Nottingham Forest
Everton v Manchester City
Leeds United v Burnley
Manchester United v Liverpool
Newcastle United v Brighton
Wolves v Sunderland

MAY 9

Brighton v Wolves
Burnley v Aston Villa
Crystal Palace v Everton
Fulham v Bournemouth
Liverpool v Chelsea
Manchester City v Brentford
Nottingham Forest v Newcastle United
Sunderland v Manchester United
Tottenham Hotspur v Leeds United
West Ham United v Arsenal

MAY 17

Arsenal v Burnley
Aston Villa v Liverpool
Bournemouth v Manchester City
Brentford v Crystal Palace
Chelsea v Tottenham Hotspur
Everton v Sunderland
Leeds United v Brighton
Manchester United v Nottingham Forest
Newcastle United v West Ham United
Wolves v Fulham

MAY 24

Brighton v Manchester United
Burnley v Wolves
Crystal Palace v Arsenal
Fulham v Newcastle United
Liverpool v Brentford
Manchester City v Aston Villa
Nottingham Forest v Bournemouth
Sunderland v Chelsea
Tottenham Hotspur v Everton
West Ham United v Leeds United

• Televised games for October 4 onwards are yet to be announced. All fixtures are subject to change

LA LIGA FIXTURES 2025-26

AUGUST 15
Girona v Rayo Vallecano
Villarreal v Real Oviedo

AUGUST 16
Alaves v Levante
Mallorca v Barcelona
Valencia v Real Sociedad

AUGUST 17
Celta Vigo v Getafe
Athletic Club v Sevilla
Espanyol v Atletico Madrid

AUGUST 18
Elche v Real Betis

AUGUST 19
Real Madrid v Osasuna

AUGUST 22
Real Betis v Alaves

AUGUST 23
Mallorca v Celta Vigo
Atletico Madrid v Elche
Levante v Barcelona

AUGUST 24
Osasuna v Valencia
Real Sociedad v Espanyol
Villarreal v Girona
Real Oviedo v Real Madrid

AUGUST 25
Athletic Club v Rayo Vallecano
Sevilla v Getafe

AUGUST 27
Celta Vigo v Real Betis

AUGUST 29
Elche v Levante
Valencia v Getafe

AUGUST 30
Alaves v Atletico Madrid
Real Oviedo v Real Sociedad
Girona v Sevilla
Real Madrid v Mallorca

AUGUST 31
Celta Vigo v Villarreal
Real Betis v Athletic Club
Espanyol v Osasuna
Rayo Vallecano v Barcelona

SEPTEMBER 14
Athletic Club v Alaves
Atletico Madrid v Villarreal
Barcelona v Valencia
Celta Vigo v Girona
Espanyol v Mallorca
Getafe v Real Oviedo
Levante v Real Betis
Osasuna v Rayo Vallecano
Real Sociedad v Real Madrid
Sevilla v Elche

SEPTEMBER 21
Alaves v Sevilla
Barcelona v Getafe
Elche v Real Oviedo
Girona v Levante
Mallorca v Atletico Madrid
Rayo Vallecano v Celta Vigo
Real Betis v Real Sociedad
Real Madrid v Espanyol
Valencia v Athletic Club
Villarreal v Osasuna

SEPTEMBER 24
Athletic Club v Girona
Atletico Madrid v Rayo Vallecano
Espanyol v Valencia
Getafe v Alaves
Levante v Real Madrid

El Gran Derbi...Sevilla host Real Betis at the end of November

Osasuna v Elche
Real Oviedo v Barcelona
Real Sociedad v Mallorca
Sevilla v Villarreal

SEPTEMBER 28
Atletico Madrid v Real Madrid
Barcelona v Real Sociedad
Elche v Celta Vigo
Getafe v Levante
Girona v Espanyol
Mallorca v Alaves
Rayo Vallecano v Sevilla
Real Betis v Osasuna
Valencia v Real Oviedo
Villarreal v Athletic Club

OCTOBER 5
Alaves v Elche
Athletic Club v Mallorca
Celta Vigo v Atletico Madrid
Espanyol v Real Betis
Girona v Valencia
Osasuna v Getafe
Real Madrid v Villarreal
Real Oviedo v Levante
Real Sociedad v Rayo Vallecano
Sevilla v Barcelona

OCTOBER 19
Alaves v Valencia
Atletico Madrid v Osasuna
Barcelona v Girona
Celta Vigo v Real Sociedad
Elche v Athletic Club
Getafe v Real Madrid
Levante v Rayo Vallecano
Real Oviedo v Espanyol
Sevilla v Mallorca
Villarreal v Real Betis

OCTOBER 26
Athletic Club v Getafe
Espanyol v Elche
Girona v Real Oviedo
Mallorca v Levante
Osasuna v Celta Vigo
Rayo Vallecano v Alaves
Real Betis v Atletico Madrid
Real Madrid v Barcelona
Real Sociedad v Sevilla
Valencia v Villarreal

NOVEMBER 2
Alaves v Espanyol
Atletico Madrid v Sevilla
Barcelona v Elche
Getafe v Girona
Levante v Celta Vigo
Real Betis v Mallorca
Real Madrid v Valencia
Real Oviedo v Osasuna
Real Sociedad v Athletic Club
Villarreal v Rayo Vallecano

NOVEMBER 9
Athletic Club v Real Oviedo
Atletico Madrid v Levante
Celta Vigo v Barcelona
Elche v Real Sociedad
Espanyol v Villarreal
Girona v Alaves
Mallorca v Getafe
Rayo Vallecano v Real Madrid
Sevilla v Osasuna
Valencia v Real Betis

NOVEMBER 23
Alaves v Celta Vigo
Barcelona v Athletic Club
Elche v Real Madrid
Espanyol v Sevilla
Getafe v Atletico Madrid
Osasuna v Real Sociedad
Real Betis v Girona
Real Oviedo v Rayo Vallecano
Valencia v Levante
Villarreal v Mallorca

NOVEMBER 30
Atletico Madrid v Real Oviedo
Barcelona v Alaves
Celta Vigo v Espanyol
Getafe v Elche
Girona v Real Madrid
Levante v Athletic Club
Mallorca v Osasuna
Rayo Vallecano v Valencia
Real Sociedad v Villarreal
Sevilla v Real Betis

DECEMBER 7
Alaves v Real Sociedad
Athletic Club v Atletico Madrid
Elche v Girona
Espanyol v Rayo Vallecano
Osasuna v Levante
Real Betis v Barcelona
Real Madrid v Celta Vigo
Real Oviedo v Mallorca
Valencia v Sevilla
Villarreal v Getafe

DECEMBER 14
Alaves v Real Madrid
Atletico Madrid v Valencia
Barcelona v Osasuna
Celta Vigo v Athletic Club
Getafe v Espanyol
Levante v Villarreal
Mallorca v Elche
Rayo Vallecano v Real Betis
Real Sociedad v Girona
Sevilla v Real Oviedo

DECEMBER 21
Athletic Club v Espanyol
Elche v Rayo Vallecano
Girona v Atletico Madrid
Levante v Real Sociedad
Osasuna v Alaves
Real Betis v Getafe
Real Madrid v Sevilla
Real Oviedo v Celta Vigo
Valencia v Mallorca
Villarreal v Barcelona

JANUARY 4
Alaves v Real Oviedo
Celta Vigo v Valencia
Elche v Villarreal
Espanyol v Barcelona
Mallorca v Girona
Osasuna v Athletic Club
Rayo Vallecano v Getafe
Real Madrid v Real Betis
Real Sociedad v Atletico Madrid
Sevilla v Levante

JANUARY 11
Athletic Club v Real Madrid
Barcelona v Atletico Madrid
Getafe v Real Sociedad
Girona v Osasuna
Levante v Espanyol
Rayo Vallecano v Mallorca
Real Oviedo v Real Betis
Sevilla v Celta Vigo
Valencia v Elche
Villarreal v Alaves

JANUARY 18
Atletico Madrid v Alaves
Celta Vigo v Rayo Vallecano
Elche v Sevilla
Espanyol v Girona
Getafe v Valencia
Mallorca v Athletic Club
Osasuna v Real Oviedo
Real Betis v Villarreal
Real Madrid v Levante
Real Sociedad v Barcelona

JANUARY 25
Alaves v Real Betis
Atletico Madrid v Mallorca
Barcelona v Real Oviedo
Girona v Getafe
Levante v Elche
Rayo Vallecano v Osasuna
Real Sociedad v Celta Vigo
Sevilla v Athletic Club
Valencia v Espanyol
Villarreal v Real Madrid

FEBRUARY 1
Athletic Club v Real Sociedad
Elche v Barcelona
Espanyol v Alaves
Getafe v Celta Vigo
Levante v Atletico Madrid
Mallorca v Sevilla
Osasuna v Villarreal
Real Betis v Valencia
Real Madrid v Rayo Vallecano
Real Oviedo v Girona

FEBRUARY 8
Alaves v Getafe
Athletic Club v Levante
Atletico Madrid v Real Betis
Barcelona v Mallorca
Celta Vigo v Osasuna
Rayo Vallecano v Real Oviedo
Real Sociedad v Elche
Sevilla v Girona
Valencia v Real Madrid
Villarreal v Espanyol

FEBRUARY 15
Elche v Osasuna
Espanyol v Celta Vigo
Getafe v Villarreal
Girona v Barcelona
Levante v Valencia
Mallorca v Real Betis
Rayo Vallecano v Atletico Madrid
Real Madrid v Real Sociedad
Real Oviedo v Athletic Club
Sevilla v Alaves

FEBRUARY 22
Alaves v Girona
Athletic Club v Elche
Atletico Madrid v Espanyol
Barcelona v Levante
Celta Vigo v Mallorca
Getafe v Sevilla
Osasuna v Real Madrid
Real Betis v Rayo Vallecano
Real Sociedad v Real Oviedo
Villarreal v Valencia

El Clasico...mark the weekends of October 26 and May10 in your diary

Atletico v Athletic ...April 19

MARCH 1
Barcelona v Villarreal
Elche v Espanyol
Girona v Celta Vigo
Levante v Alaves
Mallorca v Real Sociedad
Rayo Vallecano v Athletic Club
Real Betis v Sevilla
Real Madrid v Getafe
Real Oviedo v Atletico Madrid
Valencia v Osasuna

MARCH 8
Athletic Club v Barcelona
Atletico Madrid v Real Sociedad
Celta Vigo v Real Madrid
Espanyol v Real Oviedo
Getafe v Real Betis
Levante v Girona
Osasuna v Mallorca
Sevilla v Rayo Vallecano
Valencia v Alaves
Villarreal v Elche

MARCH 15
Alaves v Villarreal
Atletico Madrid v Getafe
Barcelona v Sevilla
Girona v Athletic Club
Mallorca v Espanyol
Rayo Vallecano v Levante
Real Betis v Celta Vigo
Real Madrid v Elche
Real Oviedo v Valencia
Real Sociedad v Osasuna

MARCH 22
Athletic Club v Real Betis
Barcelona v Rayo Vallecano
Celta Vigo v Alaves
Elche v Mallorca
Espanyol v Getafe
Levante v Real Oviedo
Osasuna v Girona
Real Madrid v Atletico Madrid
Sevilla v Valencia
Villarreal v Real Sociedad

APRIL 5
Alaves v Osasuna
Atletico Madrid v Barcelona
Getafe v Athletic Club
Girona v Villarreal
Mallorca v Real Madrid
Rayo Vallecano v Elche
Real Betis v Espanyol
Real Oviedo v Sevilla
Real Sociedad v Levante
Valencia v Celta Vigo

APRIL 12
Athletic Club v Villarreal
Barcelona v Espanyol
Celta Vigo v Real Oviedo
Elche v Valencia
Levante v Getafe
Mallorca v Rayo Vallecano
Osasuna v Real Betis
Real Madrid v Girona
Real Sociedad v Alaves
Sevilla v Atletico Madrid

APRIL 19
Alaves v Mallorca
Atletico Madrid v Athletic Club
Espanyol v Levante
Getafe v Barcelona
Osasuna v Sevilla
Rayo Vallecano v Real Sociedad
Real Betis v Real Madrid
Real Oviedo v Elche
Valencia v Girona
Villarreal v Celta Vigo

APRIL 22
Athletic Club v Osasuna
Barcelona v Celta Vigo
Elche v Atletico Madrid
Girona v Real Betis
Levante v Sevilla
Mallorca v Valencia
Rayo Vallecano v Espanyol
Real Madrid v Alaves
Real Oviedo v Villarreal
Real Sociedad v Getafe

MAY 3
Alaves v Athletic Club
Celta Vigo v Elche
Espanyol v Real Madrid
Getafe v Rayo Vallecano
Girona v Mallorca
Osasuna v Barcelona
Real Betis v Real Oviedo
Sevilla v Real Sociedad
Valencia v Atletico Madrid
Villarreal v Levante

MAY 10
Athletic Club v Valencia
Atletico Madrid v Celta Vigo
Barcelona v Real Madrid
Elche v Alaves
Levante v Osasuna
Mallorca v Villarreal
Rayo Vallecano v Girona
Real Oviedo v Getafe
Real Sociedad v Real Betis
Sevilla v Espanyol

MAY 13
Alaves v Barcelona
Celta Vigo v Levante
Espanyol v Athletic Club
Getafe v Mallorca
Girona v Real Sociedad
Osasuna v Atletico Madrid
Real Betis v Elche
Real Madrid v Real Oviedo
Valencia v Rayo Vallecano
Villarreal v Sevilla

MAY 17
Athletic Club v Celta Vigo
Atletico Madrid v Girona
Barcelona v Real Betis
Elche v Getafe
Levante v Mallorca
Osasuna v Espanyol
Rayo Vallecano v Villarreal
Real Oviedo v Alaves
Real Sociedad v Valencia
Sevilla v Real Madrid

MAY 24
Alaves v Rayo Vallecano
Celta Vigo v Sevilla
Espanyol v Real Sociedad
Getafe v Osasuna
Girona v Elche
Mallorca v Real Oviedo
Real Betis v Levante
Real Madrid v Athletic Club
Valencia v Barcelona
Villarreal v Atletico Madrid

• *Televised games for September 14 onwards are yet to be announced. All fixtures are subject to change*

BUNDESLIGA FIXTURES 2025-26

AUGUST 22
Bayern Munich v RB Leipzig

AUGUST 23
Bayer Leverkusen v Hoffenheim
Eintracht Frankfurt v Werder Bremen
Freiburg v Augsburg
Heidenheim v Wolfsburg
Union Berlin v Stuttgart
St Pauli v Borussia Dortmund

AUGUST 24
Mainz v Cologne
Borussia M'gladbach v Hamburg

AUGUST 29
Hamburg v St Pauli

AUGUST 30
Hoffenheim v Eintracht Frankfurt
RB Leipzig v Heidenheim
Stuttgart v Borussia M'gladbach
Werder Bremen v Bayer Leverkusen
Augsburg v Bayern Munich

AUGUST 31
Wolfsburg v Mainz
Borussia Dortmund v Union Berlin
Cologne v Freiburg

SEPTEMBER 12
Bayer Leverkusen v Eintracht Frankfurt

SEPTEMBER 13
Freiburg v Stuttgart
Heidenheim v Borussia Dortmund
Mainz v RB Leipzig
Union Berlin v Hoffenheim
Wolfsburg v Cologne
Bayern Munich v Hamburg

SEPTEMBER 14
St Pauli v Augsburg
Borussia M'gladbach v Werder Bremen

SEPTEMBER 19
Stuttgart v St Pauli

SEPTEMBER 20
Augsburg v Mainz
Hamburg v Heidenheim
Hoffenheim v Bayern Munich
Werder Bremen v Freiburg
RB Leipzig v Cologne

SEPTEMBER 21
Eintracht Frankfurt v Union Berlin
Bayer Leverkusen v Borussia M'gladbach
Borussia Dortmund v Wolfsburg

SEPTEMBER 26
Bayern Munich v Werder Bremen

SEPTEMBER 27
Heidenheim v Augsburg
Mainz v Borussia Dortmund
St Pauli v Bayer Leverkusen
Wolfsburg v RB Leipzig
Borussia M'gladbach v Eintracht Frankfurt

SEPTEMBER 28
Freiburg v Hoffenheim
Cologne v Stuttgart
Union Berlin v Hamburg

OCTOBER 4
Augsburg v Wolfsburg
Bayer Leverkusen v Union Berlin
Borussia Dortmund v RB Leipzig
Borussia M'gladbach v Freiburg
Eintracht Frankfurt v Bayern Munich
Hamburg v Mainz
Hoffenheim v Cologne
Stuttgart v Heidenheim
Werder Bremen v St Pauli

OCTOBER 18
Bayern Munich v Borussia Dortmund
Cologne v Augsburg
Freiburg v Eintracht Frankfurt
Heidenheim v Werder Bremen
Mainz v Bayer Leverkusen
RB Leipzig v Hamburg
St Pauli v Hoffenheim
Union Berlin v Borussia M'gladbach
Wolfsburg v Stuttgart

OCTOBER 25
Augsburg v RB Leipzig
Bayer Leverkusen v Freiburg
Borussia Dortmund v Cologne
Borussia M'gladbach v Bayern Munich
Eintracht Frankfurt v St Pauli
Hamburg v Wolfsburg
Hoffenheim v Heidenheim
Stuttgart v Mainz
Werder Bremen v Union Berlin

NOVEMBER 1
Augsburg v Borussia Dortmund
Bayern Munich v Bayer Leverkusen
Cologne v Hamburg
Heidenheim v Eintracht Frankfurt
Mainz v Werder Bremen
RB Leipzig v Stuttgart
St Pauli v Borussia M'gladbach
Union Berlin v Freiburg
Wolfsburg v Hoffenheim

Curtain-raiser...RB Leipzig will take part in the season's opening fixture against the champions

NOVEMBER 8
Bayer Leverkusen v Heidenheim
Borussia M'gladbach v Cologne
Eintracht Frankfurt v Mainz
Freiburg v St Pauli
Hamburg v Borussia Dortmund
Hoffenheim v RB Leipzig
Union Berlin v Bayern Munich
Stuttgart v Augsburg
Werder Bremen v Wolfsburg

NOVEMBER 22
Augsburg v Hamburg
Bayern Munich v Freiburg
Borussia Dortmund v Stuttgart
Cologne v Eintracht Frankfurt
Heidenheim v Borussia M'gladbach
Mainz v Hoffenheim
RB Leipzig v Werder Bremen
St Pauli v Union Berlin
Wolfsburg v Bayer Leverkusen

NOVEMBER 29
Bayer Leverkusen v Borussia Dortmund
Bayern Munich v St Pauli
Borussia M'gladbach v RB Leipzig
Eintracht Frankfurt v Wolfsburg
Freiburg v Mainz
Hamburg v Stuttgart
Hoffenheim v Augsburg
Union Berlin v Heidenheim
Werder Bremen v Cologne

DECEMBER 6
Augsburg v Bayer Leverkusen
Borussia Dortmund v Hoffenheim
Cologne v St Pauli
Hamburg v Werder Bremen
Heidenheim v Freiburg
Mainz v Borussia M'gladbach
RB Leipzig v Eintracht Frankfurt
Stuttgart v Bayern Munich
Wolfsburg v Union Berlin

DECEMBER 13
Bayer Leverkusen v Cologne
Bayern Munich v Mainz
Borussia M'gladbach v Wolfsburg
Eintracht Frankfurt v Augsburg
Freiburg v Borussia Dortmund
Hoffenheim v Hamburg
St Pauli v Heidenheim
Union Berlin v RB Leipzig
Werder Bremen v Stuttgart

DECEMBER 20
Augsburg v Werder Bremen
Borussia Dortmund v Borussia M'gladbach
Cologne v Union Berlin
Hamburg v Eintracht Frankfurt
Heidenheim v Bayern Munich
Mainz v St Pauli
RB Leipzig v Bayer Leverkusen
Stuttgart v Hoffenheim
Wolfsburg v Freiburg

JANUARY 10
Bayer Leverkusen v Stuttgart
Bayern Munich v Wolfsburg
Borussia M'gladbach v Augsburg
Eintracht Frankfurt v Borussia Dortmund
Freiburg v Hamburg
Heidenheim v Cologne
St Pauli v RB Leipzig
Union Berlin v Mainz
Werder Bremen v Hoffenheim

JANUARY 14
Augsburg v Union Berlin
Borussia Dortmund v Werder Bremen
Cologne v Bayern Munich
Hamburg v Bayer Leverkusen
Hoffenheim v Borussia M'gladbach
Mainz v Heidenheim
RB Leipzig v Freiburg
Stuttgart v Eintracht Frankfurt
Wolfsburg v St Pauli

JANUARY 17
Augsburg v Freiburg
Borussia Dortmund v St Pauli
Cologne v Mainz
Hamburg v Borussia M'gladbach
Hoffenheim v Bayer Leverkusen
RB Leipzig v Bayern Munich
Stuttgart v Union Berlin
Werder Bremen v Eintracht Frankfurt
Wolfsburg v Heidenheim

Top-flight return... Hamburg's Volksparkstadion will be rocking this season

Der Klassiker... **Dortmund host Bayern on the last weekend in February**

JANUARY 24
Bayer Leverkusen v Werder Bremen
Bayern Munich v Augsburg
Borussia M'gladbach v Stuttgart
Eintracht Frankfurt v Hoffenheim
Freiburg v Cologne
Heidenheim v RB Leipzig
Mainz v Wolfsburg
St Pauli v Hamburg
Union Berlin v Borussia Dortmund

JANUARY 31
Augsburg v St Pauli
Borussia Dortmund v Heidenheim
Cologne v Wolfsburg
Eintracht Frankfurt v Bayer Leverkusen
Hamburg v Bayern Munich
Hoffenheim v Union Berlin
RB Leipzig v Mainz
Stuttgart v Freiburg
Werder Bremen v Borussia M'gladbach

FEBRUARY 7
Bayern Munich v Hoffenheim
Borussia M'gladbach v Bayer Leverkusen
Cologne v RB Leipzig
Freiburg v Werder Bremen
Heidenheim v Hamburg
Mainz v Augsburg
St Pauli v Stuttgart
Union Berlin v Eintracht Frankfurt
Wolfsburg v Borussia Dortmund

FEBRUARY 14
Augsburg v Heidenheim
Bayer Leverkusen v St Pauli
Borussia Dortmund v Mainz
Eintracht Frankfurt v Borussia M'gladbach
Hamburg v Union Berlin
Hoffenheim v Freiburg
RB Leipzig v Wolfsburg
Stuttgart v Cologne
Werder Bremen v Bayern Munich

FEBRUARY 21
Bayern Munich v Eintracht Frankfurt
Freiburg v Borussia M'gladbach
Cologne v Hoffenheim
Heidenheim v Stuttgart
Mainz v Hamburg
RB Leipzig v Borussia Dortmund
St Pauli v Werder Bremen
Union Berlin v Bayer Leverkusen
Wolfsburg v Augsburg

FEBRUARY 28
Augsburg v Cologne
Bayer Leverkusen v Mainz
Borussia Dortmund v Bayern Munich
Borussia M'gladbach v Union Berlin
Eintracht Frankfurt v Freiburg
Hamburg v RB Leipzig
Hoffenheim v St Pauli
Stuttgart v Wolfsburg
Werder Bremen v Heidenheim

MARCH 7
Bayern Munich v Borussia M'gladbach
Cologne v Borussia Dortmund
Freiburg v Bayer Leverkusen
Heidenheim v Hoffenheim
Mainz v Stuttgart
RB Leipzig v Augsburg
St Pauli v Eintracht Frankfurt
Union Berlin v Werder Bremen
Wolfsburg v Hamburg

MARCH 14
Bayer Leverkusen v Bayern Munich
Borussia Dortmund v Augsburg
Borussia M'gladbach v St Pauli
Eintracht Frankfurt v Heidenheim
Freiburg v Union Berlin
Hamburg v Cologne
Hoffenheim v Wolfsburg
Stuttgart v RB Leipzig
Werder Bremen v Mainz

MARCH 21
Augsburg v Stuttgart
Bayern Munich v Union Berlin
Borussia Dortmund v Hamburg
Cologne v Borussia M'gladbach
Heidenheim v Bayer Leverkusen
Mainz v Eintracht Frankfurt
RB Leipzig v Hoffenheim
St Pauli v Freiburg
Wolfsburg v Werder Bremen

APRIL 4
Bayer Leverkusen v Wolfsburg
Borussia M'gladbach v Heidenheim
Eintracht Frankfurt v Cologne
Freiburg v Bayern Munich
Hamburg v Augsburg
Hoffenheim v Mainz
Stuttgart v Borussia Dortmund
Union Berlin v St Pauli
Werder Bremen v RB Leipzig

APRIL 11
Augsburg v Hoffenheim
Borussia Dortmund v Bayer Leverkusen
Cologne v Werder Bremen
Heidenheim v Union Berlin
Mainz v Freiburg
RB Leipzig v Borussia M'gladbach
St Pauli v Bayern Munich
Stuttgart v Hamburg
Wolfsburg v Eintracht Frankfurt

APRIL 18
Bayer Leverkusen v Augsburg
Bayern Munich v Stuttgart
Borussia M'gladbach v Mainz
Eintracht Frankfurt v RB Leipzig
Freiburg v Heidenheim
Hoffenheim v Borussia Dortmund
St Pauli v Cologne
Union Berlin v Wolfsburg
Werder Bremen v Hamburg

APRIL 25
Augsburg v Eintracht Frankfurt
Borussia Dortmund v Freiburg
Cologne v Bayer Leverkusen
Hamburg v Hoffenheim
Heidenheim v St Pauli
Mainz v Bayern Munich
RB Leipzig v Union Berlin
Stuttgart v Werder Bremen
Wolfsburg v Borussia M'gladbach

MAY 2
Bayer Leverkusen v RB Leipzig
Bayern Munich v Heidenheim
Borussia M'gladbach v Borussia Dortmund
Eintracht Frankfurt v Hamburg
Freiburg v Wolfsburg
Hoffenheim v Stuttgart
St Pauli v Mainz
Union Berlin v Cologne
Werder Bremen v Augsburg

MAY 9
Augsburg v Borussia M'gladbach
Borussia Dortmund v Eintracht Frankfurt
Cologne v Heidenheim
Hamburg v Freiburg
Hoffenheim v Werder Bremen
Mainz v Union Berlin
RB Leipzig v St Pauli
Stuttgart v Bayer Leverkusen
Wolfsburg v Bayern Munich

MAY 16
Bayer Leverkusen v Hamburg
Bayern Munich v Cologne
Borussia M'gladbach v Hoffenheim
Eintracht Frankfurt v Stuttgart
Freiburg v RB Leipzig
Heidenheim v Mainz
St Pauli v Wolfsburg
Union Berlin v Augsburg
Werder Bremen v Borussia Dortmund

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SERIE A FIXTURES 2025-26

AUGUST 23
Genoa v Lecce
Sassuolo v Napoli
Milan v Cremonese
Roma v Bologna

AUGUST 24
Cagliari v Fiorentina
Como v Lazio
Atalanta v Pisa
Juventus v Parma

AUGUST 25
Udinese v Verona
Internazionale v Torino

AUGUST 29
Cremonese v Sassuolo
Lecce v Milan

AUGUST 30
Bologna v Como
Parma v Atalanta
Napoli v Cagliari
Pisa v Roma

AUGUST 31
Genoa v Juventus
Torino v Fiorentina
Internazionale v Udinese
Lazio v Verona

SEPTEMBER 13
Cagliari v Parma
Juventus v Internazionale
Fiorentina v Napoli

SEPTEMBER 14
Roma v Torino
Atalanta v Lecce
Pisa v Udinese
Sassuolo v Lazio
Milan v Bologna

SEPTEMBER 15
Verona v Cremonese
Como v Genoa

SEPTEMBER 21
Bologna v Genoa
Cremonese v Parma
Fiorentina v Como
Internazionale v Sassuolo
Lazio v Roma
Lecce v Cagliari
Napoli v Pisa
Torino v Atalanta
Udinese v Milan
Verona v Juventus

SEPTEMBER 28
Cagliari v Internazionale
Como v Cremonese
Genoa v Lazio
Juventus v Atalanta
Lecce v Bologna
Milan v Napoli
Parma v Torino
Pisa v Fiorentina
Roma v Verona
Sassuolo v Udinese

OCTOBER 5
Atalanta v Como
Bologna v Pisa
Fiorentina v Roma
Internazionale v Cremonese
Juventus v Milan
Lazio v Torino
Napoli v Genoa
Parma v Lecce
Udinese v Cagliari
Verona v Sassuolo

OCTOBER 19
Atalanta v Lazio
Cagliari v Bologna
Como v Juventus
Cremonese v Udinese
Genoa v Parma
Lecce v Sassuolo
Milan v Fiorentina
Pisa v Verona
Roma v Internazionale
Torino v Napoli

OCTOBER 26
Cremonese v Atalanta
Fiorentina v Bologna
Lazio v Juventus
Milan v Pisa
Napoli v Internazionale
Parma v Como
Sassuolo v Roma
Torino v Genoa
Udinese v Lecce
Verona v Cagliari

OCTOBER 29
Atalanta v Milan
Bologna v Torino
Cagliari v Sassuolo
Como v Verona
Genoa v Cremonese
Internazionale v Fiorentina
Juventus v Udinese
Lecce v Napoli
Pisa v Lazio
Roma v Parma

NOVEMBER 2
Cremonese v Juventus
Fiorentina v Lecce
Lazio v Cagliari
Milan v Roma
Napoli v Como
Parma v Bologna
Sassuolo v Genoa
Torino v Pisa
Udinese v Atalanta
Verona v Internazionale

NOVEMBER 9
Atalanta v Sassuolo
Bologna v Napoli
Como v Cagliari
Genoa v Fiorentina
Internazionale v Lazio
Juventus v Torino
Lecce v Verona
Parma v Milan
Pisa v Cremonese
Roma v Udinese

NOVEMBER 23
Cagliari v Genoa
Cremonese v Roma
Fiorentina v Juventus
Internazionale v Milan
Lazio v Lecce
Napoli v Atalanta
Sassuolo v Pisa
Torino v Como
Udinese v Bologna
Verona v Parma

NOVEMBER 30
Atalanta v Fiorentina
Bologna v Cremonese
Como v Sassuolo
Genoa v Verona
Juventus v Cagliari
Lecce v Torino
Milan v Lazio
Parma v Udinese
Pisa v Internazionale
Roma v Napoli

DECEMBER 7
Cagliari v Roma
Cremonese v Lecce
Internazionale v Como
Lazio v Bologna
Napoli v Juventus
Pisa v Parma
Sassuolo v Fiorentina
Torino v Milan
Udinese v Genoa
Verona v Atalanta

DECEMBER 14
Atalanta v Cagliari
Bologna v Juventus
Fiorentina v Verona
Genoa v Internazionale
Lecce v Pisa
Milan v Sassuolo
Parma v Lazio
Roma v Como
Torino v Cremonese
Udinese v Napoli

DECEMBER 21
Cagliari v Pisa
Como v Milan
Fiorentina v Udinese
Genoa v Atalanta
Internazionale v Lecce

Inter v Milan...the San Siro hosts the Milan derby on November 23 and March 8

Juventus v Roma
Lazio v Cremonese
Napoli v Parma
Sassuolo v Torino
Verona v Bologna

DECEMBER 28
Bologna v Sassuolo
Cremonese v Napoli
Lecce v Como
Milan v Verona
Parma v Fiorentina
Pisa v Juventus
Roma v Genoa
Torino v Cagliari
Udinese v Lazio
Atalanta v Internazionale

JANUARY 3
Atalanta v Roma
Cagliari v Milan
Como v Udinese
Fiorentina v Cremonese

Champions...last season's Serie A winners Napoli

Genoa v Pisa
Internazionale v Bologna
Juventus v Lecce
Lazio v Napoli
Sassuolo v Parma
Verona v Torino

JANUARY 6

Bologna v Atalanta
Cremonese v Cagliari
Lazio v Fiorentina
Lecce v Roma
Milan v Genoa
Napoli v Verona
Parma v Internazionale
Pisa v Como
Sassuolo v Juventus
Torino v Udinese

JANUARY 11

Atalanta v Torino
Como v Bologna
Fiorentina v Milan
Genoa v Cagliari
Internazionale v Napoli
Juventus v Cremonese
Lecce v Parma
Roma v Sassuolo
Udinese v Pisa
Verona v Lazio

JANUARY 18

Bologna v Fiorentina
Cagliari v Juventus
Cremonese v Verona
Lazio v Como
Milan v Lecce
Napoli v Sassuolo
Parma v Genoa
Pisa v Atalanta
Torino v Roma
Udinese v Internazionale

JANUARY 25

Atalanta v Parma
Como v Torino
Fiorentina v Cagliari
Genoa v Bologna
Internazionale v Pisa
Juventus v Napoli
Lecce v Lazio
Roma v Milan
Sassuolo v Cremonese
Verona v Udinese

FEBRUARY 1

Bologna v Milan
Cagliari v Verona
Como v Atalanta
Cremonese v Internazionale
Lazio v Genoa
Napoli v Fiorentina
Parma v Juventus
Pisa v Sassuolo
Torino v Lecce
Udinese v Roma

FEBRUARY 8

Atalanta v Cremonese
Bologna v Parma
Fiorentina v Torino
Genoa v Napoli
Juventus v Lazio
Lecce v Udinese
Milan v Como
Roma v Cagliari
Sassuolo v Internazionale
Verona v Pisa

FEBRUARY 15

Cagliari v Lecce
Como v Fiorentina
Cremonese v Genoa
Internazionale v Juventus
Lazio v Atalanta
Napoli v Roma
Parma v Verona
Pisa v Milan
Torino v Bologna
Udinese v Sassuolo

FEBRUARY 22

Atalanta v Napoli
Bologna v Udinese
Cagliari v Lazio
Fiorentina v Pisa
Genoa v Torino
Juventus v Como
Lecce v Internazionale
Milan v Parma
Roma v Cremonese
Sassuolo v Verona

MARCH 1

Como v Lecce
Cremonese v Milan
Internazionale v Genoa
Parma v Cagliari
Pisa v Bologna
Roma v Juventus
Sassuolo v Atalanta
Torino v Lazio
Udinese v Fiorentina
Verona v Napoli

MARCH 8

Atalanta v Udinese
Bologna v Verona
Cagliari v Como
Fiorentina v Parma
Genoa v Roma
Juventus v Pisa
Lazio v Sassuolo
Lecce v Cremonese
Milan v Internazionale
Napoli v Torino

MARCH 15

Como v Roma
Cremonese v Fiorentina
Internazionale v Atalanta
Lazio v Milan
Napoli v Lecce
Pisa v Cagliari
Sassuolo v Bologna
Torino v Parma
Udinese v Juventus
Verona v Genoa

MARCH 22

Atalanta v Verona
Bologna v Lazio
Cagliari v Napoli
Como v Pisa
Fiorentina v Internazionale
Genoa v Udinese
Juventus v Sassuolo
Milan v Torino
Parma v Cremonese
Roma v Lecce

APRIL 4

Cremonese v Bologna
Internazionale v Roma
Juventus v Genoa
Lazio v Parma
Lecce v Atalanta
Napoli v Milan
Pisa v Torino
Sassuolo v Cagliari
Udinese v Como
Verona v Fiorentina

APRIL 12

Atalanta v Juventus
Bologna v Lecce
Cagliari v Cremonese
Como v Internazionale
Fiorentina v Lazio
Genoa v Sassuolo
Milan v Udinese
Parma v Napoli
Roma v Pisa
Torino v Verona

APRIL 19

Cremonese v Torino
Internazionale v Cagliari
Juventus v Bologna
Lecce v Fiorentina
Napoli v Lazio
Pisa v Genoa
Roma v Atalanta
Sassuolo v Como
Udinese v Parma
Verona v Milan

APRIL 26

Bologna v Roma
Cagliari v Atalanta
Fiorentina v Sassuolo
Genoa v Como
Lazio v Udinese
Milan v Juventus
Napoli v Cremonese
Parma v Pisa
Torino v Internazionale
Verona v Lecce

MAY 3

Atalanta v Genoa
Bologna v Cagliari
Como v Napoli
Cremonese v Lazio
Internazionale v Parma
Juventus v Verona
Pisa v Lecce
Roma v Fiorentina
Sassuolo v Milan
Udinese v Torino

MAY 10

Cagliari v Udinese
Cremonese v Pisa
Fiorentina v Genoa
Lazio v Internazionale
Lecce v Juventus
Milan v Atalanta
Napoli v Bologna
Parma v Roma
Torino v Sassuolo
Verona v Como

MAY 17

Atalanta v Bologna
Cagliari v Torino
Como v Parma
Genoa v Milan
Internazionale v Verona
Juventus v Fiorentina
Pisa v Napoli
Roma v Lazio
Sassuolo v Lecce
Udinese v Cremonese

MAY 24

Bologna v Internazionale
Cremonese v Como
Fiorentina v Atalanta
Lazio v Pisa
Lecce v Genoa
Milan v Cagliari
Napoli v Udinese
Parma v Sassuolo
Torino v Juventus
Verona v Roma

New Roma manager... Gian Piero Gasperini will welcome his old side Atalanta in mid-April

• Televised games for September 21 onwards are yet to be announced. All fixtures are subject to change

LIGUE 1 FIXTURES 2025-26

AUGUST 15
Rennes v Marseille

AUGUST 16
Lens v Lyon
Monaco v Le Havre
Nice v Toulouse

AUGUST 17
Brest v Lille
Angers v Paris FC
Auxerre v Lorient
Metz v Strasbourg
Nantes v Paris Saint-Germain

AUGUST 22
Paris Saint-Germain v Angers

AUGUST 23
Marseille v Paris FC
Nice v Auxerre
Lyon v Metz

AUGUST 24
Lorient v Rennes
Le Havre v Lens
Strasbourg v Nantes
Toulouse v Brest
Lille v Monaco

AUGUST 29
Lens v Brest

AUGUST 30
Lorient v Lille
Nantes v Auxerre
Toulouse v Paris Saint-Germain

AUGUST 31
Angers v Rennes
Le Havre v Nice
Monaco v Strasbourg
Paris FC v Metz
Lyon v Marseille

SEPTEMBER 13
Auxerre v Monaco
Brest v Paris FC
Lille v Toulouse
Marseille v Lorient
Metz v Angers
Nice v Nantes
Paris Saint-Germain v Lens
Rennes v Lyon
Strasbourg v Le Havre

SEPTEMBER 20
Auxerre v Toulouse
Brest v Nice
Le Havre v Lorient
Lens v Lille
Lyon v Angers
Marseille v Paris Saint-Germain
Monaco v Metz
Nantes v Rennes
Paris FC v Strasbourg

SEPTEMBER 27
Angers v Brest
Lille v Lyon
Lorient v Monaco
Metz v Le Havre
Nice v Paris FC
Paris Saint-Germain v Auxerre
Rennes v Lens
Strasbourg v Marseille
Toulouse v Nantes

OCTOBER 4
Auxerre v Lens
Brest v Nantes
Le Havre v Rennes
Lille v Paris Saint-Germain
Lyon v Toulouse
Metz v Marseille
Monaco v Nice
Paris FC v Lorient
Strasbourg v Angers

OCTOBER 18
Angers v Monaco
Lens v Paris FC
Lorient v Brest
Marseille v Le Havre
Nantes v Lille
Nice v Lyon
Paris Saint-Germain v Strasbourg
Rennes v Auxerre
Toulouse v Metz

OCTOBER 25
Angers v Lorient
Auxerre v Le Havre
Brest v Paris Saint-Germain
Lens v Marseille
Lille v Metz
Lyon v Strasbourg
Monaco v Toulouse
Paris FC v Nantes
Rennes v Nice

OCTOBER 28
Le Havre v Brest
Lorient v Paris Saint-Germain
Marseille v Angers
Metz v Lens
Nantes v Monaco
Nice v Lille
Paris FC v Lyon
Strasbourg v Auxerre
Toulouse v Rennes

NOVEMBER 1
Auxerre v Marseille
Brest v Lyon
Lens v Lorient
Lille v Angers
Monaco v Paris FC
Nantes v Metz
Paris Saint-Germain v Nice
Rennes v Strasbourg
Toulouse v Le Havre

NOVEMBER 8
Angers v Auxerre
Le Havre v Nantes
Lorient v Toulouse
Lyon v Paris Saint-Germain
Marseille v Brest
Metz v Nice
Monaco v Lens
Paris FC v Rennes
Strasbourg v Lille

NOVEMBER 22
Auxerre v Lyon
Brest v Metz
Lens v Strasbourg
Lille v Paris FC
Nantes v Lorient
Nice v Marseille
Paris Saint-Germain v Le Havre
Rennes v Monaco
Toulouse v Angers

NOVEMBER 29
Angers v Lens
Le Havre v Lille
Lorient v Nice
Lyon v Nantes
Marseille v Toulouse
Metz v Rennes
Monaco v Paris Saint-Germain
Paris FC v Auxerre
Strasbourg v Brest

DECEMBER 6
Auxerre v Metz
Brest v Monaco
Le Havre v Paris FC
Lille v Marseille
Lorient v Lyon
Nantes v Lens
Nice v Angers
Paris Saint-Germain v Rennes
Toulouse v Strasbourg

***Le Classique*...sparks will fly when Marseille host Paris Saint-Germain in late September**

Derby de la Cote d'Azur... **French Riviera clubs Nice and Monaco go head-to-head in early February**

DECEMBER 13
Angers v Nantes
Auxerre v Lille
Lens v Nice
Lyon v Le Havre
Marseille v Monaco
Metz v Paris Saint-Germain
Paris FC v Toulouse
Rennes v Brest
Strasbourg v Lorient

JANUARY 3
Brest v Auxerre
Le Havre v Angers
Lille v Rennes
Lorient v Metz
Marseille v Nantes
Monaco v Lyon
Nice v Strasbourg
Paris Saint-Germain v Paris FC
Toulouse v Lens

JANUARY 17
Angers v Marseille
Lens v Auxerre
Lyon v Brest
Monaco v Lorient
Nantes v Paris FC
Paris Saint-Germain v Lille
Rennes v Le Havre
Strasbourg v Metz
Toulouse v Nice

JANUARY 24
Auxerre v Paris Saint-Germain
Brest v Toulouse
Le Havre v Monaco
Lille v Strasbourg
Marseille v Lens
Metz v Lyon
Nantes v Nice
Paris FC v Angers
Rennes v Lorient

JANUARY 31
Angers v Metz
Lens v Le Havre
Lorient v Nantes
Lyon v Lille
Monaco v Rennes
Nice v Brest
Paris FC v Marseille
Strasbourg v Paris Saint-Germain
Toulouse v Auxerre

FEBRUARY 7
Angers v Toulouse
Auxerre v Paris FC
Brest v Lorient
Le Havre v Strasbourg
Lens v Rennes
Metz v Lille
Nantes v Lyon
Nice v Monaco
Paris Saint-Germain v Marseille

FEBRUARY 14
Le Havre v Toulouse
Lille v Brest
Lorient v Angers
Lyon v Nice
Marseille v Strasbourg
Metz v Auxerre
Monaco v Nantes
Paris FC v Lens
Rennes v Paris Saint-Germain

FEBRUARY 21
Angers v Lille
Auxerre v Rennes
Brest v Marseille
Lens v Monaco
Nantes v Le Havre
Nice v Lorient
Paris Saint-Germain v Metz
Strasbourg v Lyon
Toulouse v Paris FC

FEBRUARY 28
Le Havre v Paris Saint-Germain
Lille v Nantes
Lorient v Auxerre
Marseille v Lyon
Metz v Brest
Monaco v Angers
Paris FC v Nice
Rennes v Toulouse
Strasbourg v Lens

MARCH 7
Auxerre v Strasbourg
Brest v Le Havre
Lens v Metz
Lille v Lorient
Lyon v Paris FC
Nantes v Angers
Nice v Rennes
Paris Saint-Germain v Monaco
Toulouse v Marseille

MARCH 14
Angers v Nice
Le Havre v Lyon
Lorient v Lens
Marseille v Auxerre
Metz v Toulouse
Monaco v Brest
Paris Saint-Germain v Nantes
Rennes v Lille
Strasbourg v Paris FC

MARCH 21
Auxerre v Brest
Lens v Angers
Lyon v Monaco
Marseille v Lille
Nantes v Strasbourg
Nice v Paris Saint-Germain
Paris FC v Le Havre
Rennes v Metz
Toulouse v Lorient

APRIL 4
Angers v Lyon
Brest v Rennes
Le Havre v Auxerre
Lille v Lens
Lorient v Paris FC
Metz v Nantes
Monaco v Marseille
Paris Saint-Germain v Toulouse
Strasbourg v Nice

APRIL 11
Auxerre v Nantes
Brest v Strasbourg
Lens v Paris Saint-Germain
Lyon v Lorient
Marseille v Metz
Nice v Le Havre
Paris FC v Monaco
Rennes v Angers
Toulouse v Lille

APRIL 18
Angers v Le Havre
Lens v Toulouse
Lille v Nice
Lorient v Marseille
Metz v Paris FC
Monaco v Auxerre
Nantes v Brest
Paris Saint-Germain v Lyon
Strasbourg v Rennes

APRIL 25
Angers v Paris Saint-Germain
Brest v Lens
Le Havre v Metz
Lorient v Strasbourg
Lyon v Auxerre
Marseille v Nice
Paris FC v Lille
Rennes v Nantes
Toulouse v Monaco

MAY 2
Auxerre v Angers
Lille v Le Havre
Lyon v Rennes
Metz v Monaco
Nantes v Marseille
Nice v Lens
Paris FC v Brest
Paris Saint-Germain v Lorient
Strasbourg v Toulouse

MAY 8
Angers v Strasbourg
Auxerre v Nice
Le Havre v Marseille
Lens v Nantes
Metz v Lorient
Monaco v Lille
Paris Saint-Germain v Brest
Rennes v Paris FC
Toulouse v Lyon

MAY 15
Brest v Angers
Lille v Auxerre
Lorient v Le Havre
Lyon v Lens
Marseille v Rennes
Nantes v Toulouse
Nice v Metz
Paris FC v Paris Saint-Germain
Strasbourg v Monaco

New boys...Paris FC are back in the French top flight for the first time since 1979

• Televised games for September 13 onwards are yet to be announced. All fixtures are subject to change

Internationals

WOMEN'S EURO 2025

Group A

Jul 2 – Thun
Iceland 0
Finland 1 (Kosola 70)

Jul 2 – Basel
Switzerland 1 (Riesen 28)
Norway 2 (Hegerberg 54, Stierli 58 og)

Jul 6 – Sion
Norway 2 (Nystrom 3 og, Graham Hansen 84)
Finland 1 (Sevenius 32)

Jul 6 – Bern
Switzerland 2 (Reuteler 76, Pilgrim 90)
Iceland 0

Jul 10 – Geneva
Finland 1 (Kuikka 79 pen)
Switzerland 1 (Xhemaili 90+2)

Jul 10 – Thun
Norway 4 (Gaupset 15, 26, Maanum 49, 76)
Iceland 3 (Jonsdottir 6, Eiriksdottir 84, Viggosdottir 90+5 pen)

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Norway (Q)	3	3	0	0	8	5	9
Switzerland (Q)	3	1	1	1	4	3	4
Finland	3	1	1	1	3	3	4
Iceland	3	0	0	3	3	7	0

Group B

Jul 3 – Sion
Belgium 0
Italy 1 (Caruso 44)

Jul 3 – Bern
Spain 5 (Gonzalez 2, 43, Lopez 7, Putellas 41, Martin-Prieto 90+3)
Portugal 0

Jul 7 – Thun
Spain 6 (Putellas 22, 86, Paredes 39, Gonzalez 52, Caldentey 61, Pina 81)
Belgium 2 (Vanhaevermaet 24, Eurlings 51)

Jul 7 – Geneva
Portugal 1 (Gomes 89)
Italy 1 (Girelli 70)

Jul 11 – Bern
Italy 1 (Oliviero 10)
Spain 3 (Del Castillo 14, Guijarro 49, Gonzalez 90+1)

Jul 11 – Sion
Portugal 1 (Encarnacao 87)
Belgium 2 (Wullaert 3, Cayman 90+6)

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Spain (Q)	3	3	0	0	14	3	9
Italy (Q)	3	1	1	1	3	4	4
Belgium	3	1	0	2	4	8	3
Portugal	3	0	1	2	2	8	1

Group C

Jul 4 – Geneva
Denmark 0
Sweden 1 (Angeldahl 55)

Jul 4 – St Gallen
Germany 2 (Brand 52, Schuller 66)
Poland 0

Jul 8 – Basel
Germany 2 (Nusken 56 pen, Schuller 66)
Denmark 1 (Vangsgaard 26)

Jul 8 – Lucerne
Poland 0
Sweden 3 (Blackstenius 28, Asllani 52, Hurtig 77)

Jul 12 – Zurich
Sweden 4 (Blackstenius 12, Holmberg 25, Rolfo 34 pen, Hurtig 80)
Germany 1 (Brand 7)

Jul 12 – Lucerne
Poland 3 (Padilla 13, Pajor 20, Wiankowska 76)
Denmark 2 (Thomsen 59, Bruun 83)

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Sweden (Q)	3	3	0	0	8	1	9
Germany (Q)	3	2	0	1	5	5	6
Poland	3	1	0	2	3	7	3
Denmark	3	0	0	3	3	6	0

Group D

Jul 5 – Lucerne
Wales 0
Netherlands 3 (Miedema 45+3, Pelova 48, Brugts 57)

Jul 5 – Zurich
France 2 (Katoto 36, Baltimore 39)
England 1 (Walsh 87)

Jul 9 – Zurich
England 4 (James 22, 60, Stanway 45+2, Toone 67)
Netherlands 0

Jul 9 – St Gallen
France 4 (Mateo 8, Diani 45+1 pen, Majri 53, Geyoro 63)
Wales 1 (Fishlock 13)

Jul 13 – Basel
Netherlands 2 (Pelova 26, Bacha 41 og)
France 5 (Toletti 22, Katoto 61, Cascarino 64, 67, Karchaoui 90+2 pen)

Jul 13 – St Gallen
England 6 (Stanway 13 pen, Toone 21, Hemp 30, Russo 44, Mead 72, Beever-Jones 89)
Wales 1 (Cain 76)

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
France (Q)	3	3	0	0	11	4	9
England (Q)	3	2	0	1	11	3	6
Netherlands	3	1	0	2	5	9	3
Wales	3	0	0	3	2	13	0

Quarter-Finals

Jul 16 – Geneva
Norway 1 (Hegerberg 66)
Italy 2 (Girelli 50, 90)
Norway: Fiskerstrand – Bjelde (Woldvik 87), Mjelde, Hansen, Reiten; Naalsund, Engen, Maanum (Terland 64); Graham Hansen, Hegerberg, Gaupset.
Italy: Giuliani – Oliviero, Salvai, Linari, Di Guglielmo; Caruso, Giugliano, Severini (Greggi 77); Cantore (Lenzini 90+2), Girelli (Piemonte 90+2), Bonansea (Cambiaghi 77).

Jul 17 –Zurich
Sweden 2 (Asllani 2, Blackstenius 25)
England 2 (Bronze 79, Agyemang 81)
After Extra-Time, England win 3-2 on pens
Sweden: Falk – Lundkvist (Holberg 61), Bjorn, Eriksson, Andersson (Nilden 106); Angeldahl, Zigiotti Olme; Rytting Kaneryd (Jakobsson 106), Asllani (Hurtig 77), Rolfo (Janogy 78); Blackstenius (Blomqvist 117).
England: Hampton – Bronze, Williamson (Charles 106), Carter (Morgan 70), Greenwood; Toone (Mead 70), Walsh (Clinton 104), Stanway (Agyemang 70); James, Russo, Hemp (Kelly 78).

Jul 18 – Bern
Spain 2 (Del Castillo 66, Pina 71)
Switzerland 0
Spain: Coll – Batlle, Paredes, Aleixandri, Carmona (Ouhabi 62); Bonmati, Guijarro, Putellas (Garcia 89); Caldentey (Del Castillo 62), Gonzalez (Paralluelo 78), Pina (Lopez 78).
Switzerland: Peng – Crnogorcevic, Calligaris, Maritz, Riesen (Wandeler 74); Reuteler, Walti, Vallotto (Terchoun 90), Ivelj (Pilgrim 62); Schertenleib (Xhemaili 90); Beney (Lehmann 90).
Sent off: Maritz 90+2.

Jul 19 – Basel
France 1 (Geyoro 15 pen)
Germany 1 (Nusken 25)
After Extra-Time, Germany win 6-5 on pens
France: Peyraud-Magnin; De Almeida (N'Dongala 112), Mbock (Sombath 85), Lakrar, Bacha; Geyoro (Majri 112), Jean-Francois, Karchaoui; Cascarino (Malard 76), Katoto (Mateo 76), Diani (Baltimore 67).
Germany: Berger – Linder (Kleinherne 20), Hendrich, Knaak, Kett (Cerci 114); Minge; Brand (Dallman 120), Senss (Dabritz 120), Nusken, Buhl; Hofmann (Schuller 98).
Sent off: Hendrich 13.

Semi-Finals

Jul 22 – Geneva
England 2 (Agyemang 90+6, Kelly 119)
Italy 1 (Bonansea 33)
After Extra-Time
England: Hampton – Bronze, Williamson (Agyemang 85), Morgan, Greenwood (Carter 120+1); Toone, Walsh (Clinton 106), Stanway (Kelly 77); James (Mead 46), Russo (Beever-Jones 85), Hemp.
Italy: Giuliani – Oliviero, Lenzini (Piga 89), Salvai, Linari, Di Guglielmo; Caruso, Giugliano (Greggi 89), Bonansea (Severini 73); Cantore (Cambiaghi 73), Girelli (Piemonte 64).

Jul 23 – Zurich
Germany 0
Spain 1 (Bonmati 113)
After Extra-Time
Germany: Berger – Wamser, Kleinherne (Lohmann 97), Knaak, Kett; Brand, Senss (Schuller 114), Minge, Dabritz (Dallman 64), Buhl; Hofmann (Cerci 86).
Spain: Coll – Batlle, Paredes, Mendez, Carmona; Bonmati, Guijarro, Putellas; Caldentey (Martin-Prieto 103), Gonzalez (Paralluelo 68), Pina (Del Castillo 77).

Final

Jul 27 – Basel
England 1 (Russo 57)
Spain 1 (Caldentey 25)
After Extra-Time, England win 3-1 on pens
England: Hampton – Bronze (Charles 106), Williamson, Carter, Greenwood; Walsh, Stanway (Clinton 116); Hemp, Toone (Mead 87), James (Kelly 40); Russo (Agyemang 71).
Spain: Coll – Batlle, Paredes, Aleixandri, Carmona (Ouhabi 106); Bonmati, Guijarro, Putellas (Pina 71); Del Castillo (Lopez 89), Gonzalez (Paralluelo 89), Caldentey.

2026 WORLD CUP QUALIFYING

EUROPE Section

● *16 direct slots available*

Group A
Sep 4: Luxembourg v Northern Ireland; Slovakia v Germany
Sep 7: Luxembourg v Slovakia; Germany v Northern Ireland

Group B
Sep 5: Slovenia v Sweden; Switzerland v Kosovo
Sep 8: Kosovo v Sweden; Switzerland v Slovenia

Group C
Sep 5: Greece v Belarus; Denmark v Scotland
Sep 8: Belarus v Scotland; Greece v Denmark

Group D
Sep 5: Iceland v Azerbaijan; Ukraine v France
Sep 9: Azerbaijan v Ukraine; France v Iceland

Group E
Sep 4: Georgia v Turkey; Bulgaria v Spain
Sep 7: Georgia v Bulgaria; Turkey v Spain

Group F
Sep 6: Armenia v Portugal; Republic of Ireland v Hungary
Sep 9: Armenia v Republic of Ireland; Hungary v Portugal

Group G
Sep 4: Lithuania v Malta; Netherlands v Poland
Sep 7: Lithuania v Netherlands; Poland v Finland

Group H
Sep 6:
Austria v Cyprus; San Marino v Bosnia & Herz
Sep 9:
Bosnia & Herz v Austria; Cyprus v Romania

Group I
Sep 5: Moldova v Israel; Italy v Estonia
Sep 8-9: Israel v Italy; Norway v Moldova

Group J
Sep 4:
Kazakhstan v Wales; Liechtenstein v Belgium
Sep 7: North Macedonia v Liechtenstein; Belgium v Kazakhstan

Group K
Sep 6: Latvia v Serbia; England v Andorra
Sep 9: Albania v Latvia; Serbia v England

Group L
Sep 5:
Faroe Islands v Croatia; Montenegro v Czech Rep
Sep 8:
Gibraltar v Faroe Islands; Croatia v Montenegro

SOUTH AMERICA Section

● *6 direct slots available, plus 1 play-off slot*

Sep 4:
Uruguay v Peru; Colombia v Bolivia; Paraguay v Ecuador; Argentina v Venezuela; Brazil v Chile

Sep 9:
Ecuador v Argentina; Peru v Paraguay; Bolivia v Brazil; Venezuela v Colombia; Chile v Uruguay

AFRICA Section

● *9 direct slots available, plus 1 play-off slot*

Group A
Sep 3-6: Guinea-Bissau v Sierra Leone; Djibouti v Burkina Faso; Egypt v Ethiopia
Sep 7-9: Burkina Faso v Egypt; Guinea-Bissau v Djibouti; Sierra Leone v Ethiopia

Group B
Sep 3-6: Mauritania v Togo; South Sudan v DR Congo; Senegal v Sudan
Sep 7-9: DR Congo v Senegal; Mauritania v South Sudan; Togo v Sudan

Group C
Sep 3-6: Benin v Zimbabwe; Lesotho v South Africa; Nigeria v Rwanda
Sep 7-9: South Africa v Nigeria; Benin v Lesotho; Zimbabwe v Rwanda

Group D
Sep 3-6: Angola v Libya; Mauritius v Cape Verde; Cameroon v Eswatini
Sep 7-9: Cape Verde v Cameroon; Angola v Mauritius; Libya v Eswatini

Group E
Sep 3-6: Congo v Tanzania; Morocco v Niger
Sep 7-9: Zambia v Morocco; Tanzania v Niger

Group F
Sep 3-6: Kenya v Gambia; Seychelles v Gabon; Ivory Coast v Burundi
Sep 7-9: Gabon v Ivory Coast; Kenya v Seychelles; Gambia v Burundi

Group G
Sep 3-6: Uganda v Mozambique; Somalia v Guinea; Algeria v Botswana
Sep 7-9: Guinea v Algeria; Uganda v Somalia; Mozambique v Botswana

Group H
Sep 3-6: Namibia v Malawi; Sao Tome & Principe v Equatorial Guinea; Tunisia v Liberia
Sep 7-9: Equatorial Guinea v Tunisia; Namibia v Sao Tome & Principe; Malawi v Liberia

Group I
Sep 3-6: Madagascar v Central African Republic; Chad v Ghana; Mali v Comoros
Sep 7-9: Ghana v Mali; Madagascar v Chad; Central African Republic v Comoros

CONCACAF Section

● *3 direct slots available, plus 2 play-off slots*

Third Round

Group A
Sep 4:
Suriname v Panama; Guatemala v El Salvador
Sep 8:
El Salvador v Suriname; Panama v Guatemala

Group B
Sep 5:
Bermuda v Jamaica; Trinidad & Tobago v Curacao
Sep 9:
Jamaica v Trinidad & Tobago; Curacao v Bermuda

Group C
Sep 5: Haiti v Honduras; Nicaragua v Costa Rica
Sep 9: Costa Rica v Haiti; Honduras v Nicaragua

ASIA Section

● *8 direct slots available, plus 1 play-off slot*

Fourth Round Draw

Group A
Qatar, United Arab Emirates, Oman

Group B
Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Indonesia
• *Matches take place October 8-14*

Club Football

EUROPE

2025-26 CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Second Qualifying Round – Champions Path

Jul 22-23: RFS (Lva) 1-4 Malmo (Swe); Hamrun Spartans (Mlt) 0-3 Dynamo Kyiv (Ukr); Pafos (Cyp) 1-1 Maccabi Tel Aviv (Isr); Lincoln Red Imps (Gib) 0-1 Red Star Belgrade (Srb); Noah (Arm) 1-2 Ferencvaros (Hun); Lech Poznan (Pol) 7-1 Breidablik (Isl); Copenhagen (Den) 2-0 Drita (Kos); Rijeka (Cro) 0-0 Ludogorets (Bul); Shkendija (Mkd) 1-0 FCSB (Rou); Slovan Bratislava (Svk) 4-0 Zrinjski Mostar (Bih); KuPS (Fin) 2-0 Kairat (Kaz); Shelbourne (Irl) 0-3 Qarabag (Aze)

Jul 29-30: Dynamo Kyiv (Ukr) 3-0 Hamrun Spartans (Mlt) (agg 6-0); Red Star Belgrade (Srb) 5-1 Lincoln Red Imps (Gib) (agg 6-1); Drita (Kos) 0-1 Copenhagen (Den) (agg 0-3); Zrinjski Mostar (Bih) 2-2 Slovan Bratislava (Svk) (agg 2-6); Kairat (Kaz) 3-0 KuPS (Fin) (agg 3-2); Malmo (Swe) 1-0 RFS (Lva) (agg 5-1); Maccabi Tel Aviv (Isr) 0-1 Pafos (Cyp) (agg 1-2); Ferencvaros (Hun) 4-3 Noah (Arm) (agg 6-4); Breidablik (Isl) 0-1 Lech Poznan (Pol) (agg 1-8); Ludogorets (Bul) 3-1 Rijeka (Cro) (agg 3-1, *AET*); FCSB (Rou) 1-2 Shkendija (Mkd) (agg 1-3); Qarabag (Aze) 1-0 Shelbourne (Irl) (agg 4-0)

Second Qualifying Round – League Path

Jul 22-23: Viktoria Plzen (Cze) 0-1 Servette (Sui); Rangers (Sco) 2-0 Panathinaikos (Gre); Brann (Nor) 1-4 Red Bull Salzburg (Aut)

Jul 30:
Servette (Sui) 1-3 Viktoria Plzen (Cze) (agg 2-3); Panathinaikos (Gre) 1-1 Rangers (Sco) (agg 1-3); Red Bull Salzburg (Aut) 1-1 Brann (Nor) (agg 5-2)

Third Qualifying Round – Champions Path

Aug 5-6: Malmo (Swe) 0-0 Copenhagen (Den); Dynamo Kyiv (Ukr) 0-1 Pafos (Cyp); Shkendija (Mkd) 0-1 Qarabag (Aze); Kairat (Kaz) 1-0 Slovan Bratislava (Svk); Lech Poznan (Pol) 1-3 Red Star Belgrade (Srb); Ludogorets (Bul) 0-0 Ferencvaros (Hun)

Aug 12: Copenhagen (Den) 5-0 Malmo (Swe) (agg 5-0); Pafos (Cyp) 2-0 Dynamo Kyiv (Ukr) (agg 3-0); Qarabag (Aze) 5-1 Shkendija (Mkd) (agg 6-1); Slovan Bratislava (Svk) 1-0 Kairat (Kaz) (agg 1-1, *AET, Kairat win 4-3 on pens*); Red Star Belgrade (Srb) 1-1 Lech Poznan (Pol) (agg 4-2); Ferencvaros (Hun) 3-0 Ludogorets (Bul) (agg 3-0)

Third Qualifying Round – League Path

Aug 5-6: Rangers (Sco) 3-0 Viktoria Plzen (Cze); Red Bull Salzburg (Aut) 0-1 Club Brugge (Bel); Nice (Fra) 0-2 Benfica (Por); Feyenoord (Ned) 2-1 Fenerbahce (Tur)

Aug 12: Viktoria Plzen (Cze) 2-1 Rangers (Sco) (agg 2-4); Club Brugge (Bel) 3-2 Red Bull Salzburg (Aut) (agg 4-2); Benfica (Por) 2-0 Nice (Fra) (agg 4-0); Fenerbahce (Tur) 5-2 Feyenoord (Ned) (agg 6-4)

2025-26 EUROPA LEAGUE

Second Qualifying Round

Jul 24: Lugano (Sui) 0-0 CFR Cluj (Rou); Celje (Svn) 1-1 AEK Larnaca (Cyp); Levski Sofia (Bul) 0-0 Braga (Por); Banik Ostrava (Cze) 2-2 Legia Warsaw (Pol); Anderlecht (Bel) 1-0 BK Hacken (Swe); Sheriff Tiraspol (Mda) 1-3 Utrecht (Ned); Midtjylland (Den) 1-1 Hibernian (Sco); Besiktas (Tur) 2-4 Shakhtar Donetsk (Ukr)

Jul 31: CFR Cluj (Rou) 1-0 Lugano (Sui) (agg 1-0, *AET*); AEK Larnaca (Cyp) 2-1 Celje (Svn) (agg 3-2); Braga (Por) 1-0 Levski Sofia (Bul) (agg 1-0, *AET*); Legia Warsaw (Pol) 2-1 Banik Ostrava (Cze) (agg 4-3); BK Hacken (Swe) 2-1 Anderlecht (Bel) (agg 2-2, *AET, BK Hacken win 4-2 on pens*); Utrecht (Ned) 4-1 Sheriff Tiraspol (Mda) (agg 7-2); Hibernian (Sco) 1-2 Midtjylland (Den) (agg 2-3, *AET*); Shakhtar Donetsk (Ukr) 2-0 Besiktas (Tur) (agg 6-2)

Third Qualifying Round – Champions Path

Aug 6-7: Rijeka (Cro) 1-2 Shelbourne (Irl); RFS (Lva) 1-2 KuPS (Fin); Lincoln Red Imps (Gib) 1-1 Noah (Arm); Hamrun Spartans (Mlt) 1-2 Maccabi Tel Aviv (Isr); Zrinjski Mostar (Bih) 1-1 Breidablik (Isl); FCSB (Rou) 3-2 Drita (Kos)

Aug 12-14: Shelbourne (Irl) 1-3 Rijeka (Cro) (agg 3-4); KuPS (Fin) 1-0 RFS (Lva) (agg 3-1); Noah (Arm) 0-0 Lincoln Red Imps (Gib) (agg 1-1, *AET, Lincoln Red Imps win 6-5 on pens*); Maccabi Tel Aviv (Isr) 3-1 Hamrun Spartans (Mlt) (agg 5-2); Breidablik (Isl) 1-2 Zrinjski Mostar (Bih) (agg 2-3); Drita (Kos) 1-3 FCSB (Rou) (agg 3-6)

Third Qualifying Round – Main Path

Aug 7: AEK Larnaca (Cyp) 4-1 Legia Warsaw (Pol); Fredrikstad (Nor) 1-3 Midtjylland (Den); CFR Cluj (Rou) 1-2 Braga (Por); PAOK (Gre) 0-0 Wolfsberger (Aut); Servette (Sui) 1-3 Utrecht (Ned); Panathinaikos (Gre) 0-0 Shakhtar Donetsk (Ukr); BK Hacken (Swe) 0-2 Brann (Nor)

Aug 14: Legia Warsaw (Pol) 2-1 AEK Larnaca (Cyp) (agg 3-5); Midtjylland (Den) 2-0 Fredrikstad (Nor) (agg 5-1); Braga (Por) 2-0 CFR Cluj (Rou) (agg 4-1); Wolfsberger (Aut) 0-1 PAOK (Gre) (agg 0-1, *AET*); Utrecht (Ned) 2-1 Servette (Sui) (agg 5-2); Brann (Nor) 0-1 BK Hacken (Swe) (agg 2-1); Shakhtar Donetsk (Ukr) 0-0 Panathinaikos (Gre) (agg 0-0, *AET, Panathinaikos win 4-3 on pens*)

2025-26 CONFERENCE LEAGUE

Second Qualifying Round – Champions Path

Jul 23-24: FCI Levadia (Est) 1-0 Iberia 1999 (Geo); The New Saints (Wal) 0-1 Differdange 03 (Lux); Olimpija Ljubljana (Svn) 4-2 Inter Club d'Escaldes (And); Buducnost Podgorica (Mne) 0-0 Milsami Orhei (Mda); Zalgiris (Ltu) 0-0 Linfield (Nir); Dinamo Minsk (Blr) 0-2 Egnatia (Alb)

Jul 29-31: Iberia 1999 (Geo) 2-2 FCI Levadia (Est) (agg 2-3, *AET*); Differdange 03 (Lux) 1-0 The New Saints (Wal) (agg 2-0); Inter Club d'Escaldes (And) 1-1 Olimpija Ljubljana (Svn) (agg 3-5); Milsami Orhei (Mda) 2-1 Buducnost Podgorica (Mne) (agg 2-1); Linfield (Nir) 2-0 Zalgiris (Ltu) (agg 2-0); Egnatia (Alb) 1-0 Dinamo Minsk (Blr) (agg 3-0)

Second Qualifying Round – Main Path

Jul 22-24: Ballkani (Kos) 4-2 Floriana (Mlt); Silkeborg (Den) 1-1 KA (Isl); Zira (Aze) 1-1 Hajduk Split (Cro); Dundee United (Sco) 1-0 UNA Strassen (Lux); Larne (Nir) 0-0 Prishtina (Kos); Kosice (Svk) 2-3 Neman Grodno (Blr); Vaduz (Lie) 0-1 Dungannon Swifts (Nir); Rosenborg (Nor) 5-0 Banga (Ltu); Atletic Club d'Escaldes (And) 1-2 Dinamo City (Alb); Austria Vienna (Aut) 2-0 Spaeri (Geo); Viking (Nor) 7-0 Koper (Svn); AEK Athens (Gre) 1-0 Hapoel Be'er Sheva (Isr); Pyunik (Arm) 2-1 Gyor (Hun); Riga (Lva) 2-1 Dila Gori (Geo); Rakow Czestochowa (Pol) 3-0 Zilina (Svk); Petrocub Hincesti (Mda) 0-2 Sabah (Aze); Ararat-Armenia (Arm) 0-0 Universitatea Cluj (Rou); Varazdin (Cro) 2-1 Santa Clara (Por); Kauno Zalgiris (Ltu) 1-1 Valur (Isl); Paks (Hun) 1-0 Maribor (Svn); Vllaznia (Alb) 2-1 Vikingur Reykjavik (Isl); Hammarby (Swe) 0-0 Charleroi (Bel); Radnicki 1923 (Srb) 0-0 KI (Fro); Novi Pazar (Srb) 1-2 Jagiellonia Bialystok (Pol); Polissya Zhytomyr (Ukr) 1-2 Santa Coloma (And); Vardar (Mkd) 2-1 Lausanne-Sport (Sui); HB (Fro) 1-1 Brondby (Den); Oleksandriya (Ukr) 0-2 Partizan (Srb); Hibernians (Mlt) 1-2 Spartak Trnava (Svk); St Patrick's Athletic (Irl) 1-0 Nomme Kalju (Est); Paide Linnameeskond (Est) 0-2 AIK (Swe); Sarajevo (Bih) 2-1 Universitatea Craiova (Rou); Aris Limassol (Cyp) 3-2 Puskas Akademia (Hun); St Joseph's (Gib) 0-4 Shamrock Rovers (Irl); Ilves (Fin) 4-3 AZ (Ned); Arda (Bul) 0-0 HJK (Fin); Aktobe (Kaz) 2-1 Sparta Prague (Cze); Astana (Kaz) 1-1 Zimbru Chisinau (Mda); Decic (Mne) 0-2 Rapid Vienna (Aut); Torpedo-BelAZ Zhodino (Blr) 1-1 Maccabi Haifa (Isr); Araz-Nakhchivan (Aze) 2-1 Aris (Gre); Omonia (Cyp) 1-0 Torpedo Kutaisi (Geo); Cherno More (Bul) 0-1 Istanbul Basaksehir (Tur); Sutjeska (Mne) 1-2 Beitar Jerusalem (Isr)

Jul 31: Floriana (Mlt) 1-1 Ballkani (Kos) (agg 3-5); KA (Isl) 2-3 Silkeborg (Den) (agg 3-4, *AET*); Hajduk Split (Cro) 2-1 Zira (Aze) (agg 3-2, *AET*); UNA Strassen (Lux) 0-1 Dundee United (Sco) (agg 0-2); Prishtina (Kos) 1-1 Larne (Nir) (agg 1-1, *AET, Larne win 5-4 on pens*); Neman Grodno (Blr) 1-1 Kosice (Svk) (agg 4-3); Dungannon Swifts (Nir) 0-3 Vaduz (Lie) (agg 1-3, *AET*); Banga (Ltu) 0-2 Rosenborg (Nor) (agg 0-7); Dinamo City (Alb) 1-1 Atletic Club d'Escaldes (And) (agg 3-2); Spaeri (Geo) 0-5 Austria Vienna (Aut) (agg 0-7); Koper (Svn) 3-5 Viking (Nor) (agg 3-12); Hapoel Be'er Sheva (Isr) 0-0 AEK Athens (Gre) (agg 0-1); Gyor (Hun) 3-1 Pyunik (Arm) (agg 4-3); Dila Gori (Geo) 3-3 Riga (Lva) (agg 4-5); Zilina (Svk) 1-3 Rakow Czestochowa (Pol) (agg 1-6); Sabah (Aze) 4-1 Petrocub Hincesti (Mda) (agg 6-1); Universitatea Cluj (Rou) 1-2 Ararat-Armenia (Arm) (agg 1-2, *AET*); Santa Clara (Por) 2-0 Varazdin (Cro) (agg 3-2); Valur (Isl) 1-2 Kauno Zalgiris (Ltu) (agg 2-3); Maribor (Svn) 1-1 Paks (Hun) (agg 1-2); Vikingur Reykjavik (Isl) 4-2 Vllaznia (Alb) (agg 5-4, *AET*); Charleroi (Bel) 1-2 Hammarby (Swe) (agg 1-2, *AET*); KI (Fro) 1-0 Radnicki 1923 (Srb) (agg 1-0); Jagiellonia Bialystok (Pol) 3-1 Novi Pazar (Srb) (agg 5-2); Santa Coloma (And) 1-4 Polissya Zhytomyr (Ukr) (agg 3-5); Lausanne-Sport (Sui) 5-0 Vardar (Mkd) (agg 6-2); Brondby (Den) 1-0 HB (Fro) (agg 2-1); Partizan (Srb) 4-0 Oleksandriya (Ukr) (agg 6-0); Spartak Trnava (Svk) 5-1 Hibernians (Mlt) (agg 7-2); Nomme Kalju (Est) 2-2 St Patrick's Athletic (Irl) (agg 2-3, *AET*); AIK (Swe) 6-0 Paide Linnameeskond (Est) (agg 8-0); Universitatea Craiova (Rou) 4-0 Sarajevo (Bih) (agg 5-2); Puskas Akademia (Hun) 0-2 Aris Limassol (Cyp) (agg 2-5); Shamrock Rovers (Irl) 0-0 St Joseph's (Gib) (agg 4-0); AZ (Ned) 5-0 Ilves (Fin) (agg 8-4); HJK (Fin) 2-2 Arda (Bul) (agg 2-2, *AET, Arda win 4-3 on pens*); Sparta Prague (Cze) 4-0 Aktobe (Kaz) (agg 5-2); Zimbru Chisinau (Mda) 0-2 Astana (Kaz) (agg 1-3); Rapid Vienna (Aut) 4-2 Decic (Mne) (agg 6-2); Maccabi Haifa (Isr) 3-0 Torpedo-BelAZ Zhodino (Blr) (agg 4-1); Aris (Gre) 2-2 Araz-Nakhchivan (Aze) (agg 3-4); Torpedo Kutaisi (Geo) 0-4 Omonia (Cyp) (agg 0-5); Istanbul Basaksehir (Tur) 4-0 Cherno More (Bul) (agg 5-0); Beitar Jerusalem (Isr) 5-2 Sutjeska (Mne) (agg 7-3)

Third Qualifying Round – Champions Path

Aug 7: Olimpija Ljubljana (Svn) 0-0 Egnatia (Alb); Milsami Orhei (Mda) 3-2 Virtus (Smr); Differdange 03 (Lux) 2-3 FCI Levadia (Est); Vikingur (Fro) 2-1 Linfield (Nir)

Aug 14: Egnatia (Alb) 2-4 Olimpija Ljubljana (Svn) (agg 2-4); Virtus (Smr) 3-0 Milsami Orhei (Mda) (agg 5-3); FCI Levadia (Est) 1-3 Differdange 03 (Lux) (agg 4-5, *AET*); Linfield (Nir) 2-0 Vikingur (Fro) (agg 3-2)

Third Qualifying Round – Main Path

Aug 7: Rapid Vienna (Aut) 2-2 Dundee United (Sco); Sparta Prague (Cze) 4-1 Ararat-Armenia (Arm); AZ (Ned) 3-0 Vaduz (Lie); Lugano (Sui) 0-5 Celje (Svn); KI (Fro) 2-0 Neman Grodno (Blr); Riga (Lva) 3-0 Beitar Jerusalem (Isr); Vikingur Reykjavik (Isl) 3-0 Brondby (Den); Hajduk Split (Cro) 2-1 Dinamo City (Alb); Anderlecht (Bel) 3-0 Sheriff Tiraspol (Mda); Lausanne-Sport (Sui) 3-1 Astana (Kaz); Larne (Nir) 0-3 Santa Clara (Por); Aris Limassol (Cyp) 2-2 AEK Athens (Gre); Viking (Nor) 1-3 Istanbul Basaksehir (Tur); Araz-Nakhchivan (Aze) 0-4 Omonia (Cyp); Ballkani (Kos) 1-0 Shamrock Rovers (Irl); Rakow Czestochowa (Pol) 0-1 Maccabi Haifa (Isr); AIK (Swe) 2-1 Gyor (Hun); Universitatea Craiova (Rou) 3-0 Spartak Trnava (Svk); Polissya Zhytomyr (Ukr) 3-0 Paks (Hun); Levski Sofia (Bul) 1-0 Sabah (Aze); Silkeborg (Den) 0-1 Jagiellonia Bialystok (Pol); Partizan (Srb) 0-2 Hibernian (Sco); Banik Ostrava (Cze) 4-3 Austria Vienna (Aut); Rosenborg (Nor) 0-0 Hammarby (Swe); St Patrick's Athletic (Irl) 1-4 Besiktas (Tur); Kauno Zalgiris (Ltu) 0-1 Arda (Bul)

Aug 13-14: Istanbul Basaksehir (Tur) 1-1 Viking (Nor) (agg 4-2); Dundee United (Sco) 2-2 Rapid Vienna (Aut) (agg 2-2, *AET, Rapid Vienna win 5-4 on pens*); Ararat-Armenia (Arm) 1-2 Sparta Prague (Cze) (agg 2-6); Vaduz (Lie) 0-1 AZ (Ned) (agg 0-4); Celje (Svn) 2-4 Lugano (Sui) (agg 7-4); Neman Grodno (Blr) 2-0 KI (Fro) (agg 2-2, *AET, Neman Grodno win 5-4 on pens*); Beitar Jerusalem (Isr) 3-1 Riga (Lva) (agg 3-4); Brondby (Den) 4-0 Vikingur Reykjavik (Isl) (agg 4-3); Dinamo City (Alb) 3-1 Hajduk Split (Cro) (agg 4-3, *AET*); Sheriff Tiraspol (Mda) 1-1 Anderlecht (Bel) (agg 1-4); Astana (Kaz) 0-2 Lausanne-Sport (Sui) (agg 1-5); Santa Clara (Por) 0-0 Larne (Nir) (agg 3-0); AEK Athens (Gre) 3-1 Aris Limassol (Cyp) (agg 5-3, *AET*); Omonia (Cyp) 5-0 Araz-Nakhchivan (Aze) (agg 9-0); Shamrock Rovers (Irl) 4-0 Ballkani (Kos) (agg 4-1); Maccabi Haifa (Isr) 0-2 Rakow Czestochowa (Pol) (agg 1-2); Gyor (Hun) 2-0 AIK (Swe) (agg 3-2); Spartak Trnava (Svk) 4-3 Universitatea Craiova (Rou) (agg 4-6, *AET*); Paks (Hun) 2-1 Polissya Zhytomyr (Ukr) (agg 2-4); Sabah (Aze) 0-2 Levski Sofia (Bul) (agg 0-3); Jagiellonia Bialystok (Pol) 2-2 Silkeborg (Den) (agg 3-2); Hibernian (Sco) 2-3 Partizan (Srb) (agg 4-3, *AET*); Austria Vienna (Aut) 1-1 Banik Ostrava (Cze) (agg 4-5); Hammarby (Swe) 0-1 Rosenborg (Nor) (agg 0-1); Besiktas (Tur) 3-2 St Patrick's Athletic (Irl) (agg 7-3); Arda (Bul) 2-0 Kauno Zalgiris (Ltu) (agg 3-0)

2025 UEFA SUPER CUP

Aug 13 – Udine
PSG (Fra) 2 (Lee Kang-in 85, Ramos 90+4)
Tottenham Hotspur (Eng) 2 (Van de Ven 39, Romero 48)
Paris Saint-Germain win 4-3 on pens
PSG: Chevalier – Hakimi, Marquinhos, Pacho, Mendes; Zaire-Emery (Lee Kang-in 68), Vitinha, Doue (Ramos 77); Kvaratskhelia (Fabian 60), Dembele, Barcola (Mbaye 67).
Tottenham Hotspur: Vicario – Porro, Danso, Romero, Van de Ven, Spence; Palhinha (Gray 72), Sarr (Bergvall 90), Bentancur; Kudus (Tel 79), Richarlison (Solanke 72).

2025 FA COMMUNITY SHIELD

Aug 10 – Wembley
Crystal Palace 2 (Mateta 17 pen, Sarr 77)
Liverpool 2 (Ekitike 4, Frimpong 21)
Crystal Palace win 3-2 on pens

2025 DUTCH SUPER CUP

Aug 3 – Eindhoven
PSV 2 (Nauber 78 og, Dest 84)
Go Ahead Eagles 1 (Suray 35)

2025 PORTUGUESE SUPER CUP

Jul 31 – Faro
Sporting 0
Benfica 1 (Pavlidis 50)

SOUTH AMERICA

2025 COPA LIBERTADORES

Last 16 – 1st Leg

Aug 12 – Medellin
Atletico Nacional (Col) 0
Sao Paulo (Bra) 0

Aug 12 – Fortaleza
Fortaleza (Bra) 0
Velez Sarsfield (Arg) 0

Aug 12 – Montevideo
Penarol (Uru) 1 (Terans 78)
Racing (Arg) 0

Aug 13 – Rio de Janeiro
Flamengo (Bra) 1 (Bruno Henrique 28)
Internacional (Bra) 0

Aug 13 – Asuncion
Cerro Porteno (Par) 0
Estudiantes (Arg) 1 (Ascacibar 90+8 pen)

Aug 14 – Lima
Universitario (Per) 0
Palmeiras (Bra) 4 (Gomez 7 pen, Lopez 13, 75, Vitor Roque 30)

Aug 14 – Asuncion
Libertad (Par) 0
River Plate (Arg) 0

Aug 14 – Rio de Janeiro
Botafogo (Bra) 1 (Artur 1)
LDU Quito (Ecu) 0

2025 COPA SUDAMERICANA

Knockout Round Play-Offs – 2nd Leg

Jul 22 – Cali
America de Cali (Col) 2 (Murillo 28, Garces 90+6)
Bahia (Bra) 0
America de Cali win 2-0 on aggregate

Jul 22 – Rio de Janeiro
Vasco da Gama (Bra) 1 (Vegetti 66)
Independiente del Valle (Ecu) 1 (Spinelli 37)
Independiente del Valle win 5-1 on aggregate

Jul 22 – Montevideo
Cerro Largo (Uru) 0
Central Cordoba (Arg) 3 (Perello 14, Heredia 58, Barrera 90)
Central Cordoba win 3-0 on aggregate

Jul 23 – Porto Alegre
Gremio (Bra) 1 (Gustavo Martins 56)
Alianza Lima (Per) 1 (Barcos 90+6)
Alianza Lima win 3-1 on aggregate

Jul 23 – Manizales
Once Caldas (Col) 4 (Barrios 7, Zuleta 11, Gomez 85, Quinones 90+1)
San Antonio Bulo Bulo (Bol) 0
Once Caldas win 7-0 on aggregate

Jul 23 – Santiago
Palestino (Chi) 0
Bolivar (Bol) 3 (Catano 24, Sagredo 28, Cauteruccio 66)
Bolivar win 6-0 on aggregate

Jul 24 – Belo Horizonte
Atletico Mineiro (Bra) 0
Atletico Bucaramanga (Col) 1 (Mena 45)
1-1 on aggregate, Atletico Mineiro win 3-1 on pens

Jul 24 – Asuncion
Guarani (Par) 2 (Torales 84, 89)
Universidad de Chile (Chi) 1 (Assadi 17)
Universidad de Chile win 6-2 on aggregate

Last 16 – 1st Leg

Aug 12 – Manizales
Once Caldas (Col) 1 (Moreno 57 pen)
Huracan (Arg) 0

Aug 12 – Cali
America de Cali (Col) 1 (Barrios 90+3)
Fluminense (Bra) 2 (Candelo 7 og, Canobbio 15)

Aug 12 – Quito
Independiente del Valle (Ecu) 1 (Spinelli 19)
Mushuc Runa (Ecu) 0

Aug 13 – Lima
Alianza Lima (Per) 2 (Cantero 76, 87)
Universidad Catolica (Ecu) 0

Aug 13 – La Paz
Bolivar (Bol) 2 (Cauteruccio 20, Batallini 58)
Cienciano (Per) 0

Aug 13 – Santiago
Universidad de Chile (Chi) 1 (Assadi 36)
Independiente (Arg) 0

Aug 14 – Santiago del Estero
Central Cordoba (Arg) 1 (Veron 58)
Lanus (Arg) 0

Aug 14 – Belo Horizonte
Atletico Mineiro (Bra) 2 (Cuello 67, Hulk 89)
Godoy Cruz (Arg) 1 (Andino 37)

CONCACAF

2025 LEAGUES CUP

Matchday 1

Jul 29-31: Atlanta United (USA) 1-3 Necaxa (Mex); FC Cincinnati (USA) 3-2 Monterrey (Mex); Columbus Crew (USA) 2-2 Toluca (Mex) (*Toluca win 4-2 on pens*); Charlotte FC (USA) 1-4 Juarez (Mex); Colorado Rapids (USA) 2-1 Santos Laguna (Mex); Houston Dynamo (USA) 1-4 Tigres UANL (Mex); LA Galaxy (USA) 5-2 Tijuana (Mex); Los Angeles FC (USA) 1-1 Mazatlan (Mex) (*Mazatlan win 11-10 on pens*); Inter Miami (USA) 2-1 Atlas (Mex); Minnesota United (USA) 4-1 Queretaro (Mex); CF Montreal (Can) 1-1 Leon (Mex) (*CF Montreal win 7-6 on pens*); New York City FC (USA) 0-3 Puebla (Mex); New York Red Bulls (USA) 1-0 Guadalajara (Mex); Orlando City (USA) 1-1 Pumas UNAM (Mex) (*Pumas UNAM win 4-3 on pens*); Portland Timbers (USA) 4-0 Atletico San Luis (Mex); Real Salt Lake (USA) 2-2 Club America (Mex) (*Real Salt Lake win 3-1 on pens*); Seattle Sounders (USA) 7-0 Cruz Azul (Mex); San Diego FC (USA) 2-3 Pachuca (Mex)

Matchday 2

Aug 1-3: Atlanta United (USA) 2-3 Pumas UNAM (Mex); FC Cincinnati (USA) 2-2 Juarez (Mex) (*FC Cincinnati win 4-3 on pens*); Columbus Crew (USA) 3-1 Puebla (Mex); Charlotte FC (USA) 2-2 Guadalajara (Mex) (*Guadalajara win 4-2 on pens*); Colorado Rapids (USA) 1-2 Tijuana (Mex); Houston Dynamo (USA) 0-2 Mazatlan (Mex); LA Galaxy (USA) 1-1 Cruz Azul (Mex) (*Cruz Azul win 8-7 on pens*); Los Angeles FC (USA) 1-1 Pachuca (Mex) (*Los Angeles FC win 4-2 on pens*); Inter Miami (USA) 2-2 Necaxa (Mex) (*Inter Miami win 5-4 on pens*); Minnesota United (USA) 3-3 Club America (Mex) (*Club America win 8-7 on pens*); CF Montreal (Can) 1-2 Toluca (Mex); New York City FC (USA) 2-0 Leon (Mex); New York Red Bulls (USA) 1-1 Monterrey (Mex) (*Monterrey win 5-3 on pens*); Orlando City (USA) 3-1 Atlas (Mex); Portland Timbers (USA) 1-0 Queretaro (Mex); Real Salt Lake (USA) 2-2 Atletico San Luis (Mex) (*Atletico San Luis win 4-1 on pens*); Seattle Sounders (USA) 2-1 Santos Laguna (Mex); San Diego FC (USA) 1-2 Tigres UANL (Mex)

Matchday 3

Aug 5-7: Atlanta United (USA) 4-1 Atlas (Mex); FC Cincinnati (USA) 1-2 Guadalajara (Mex); Columbus Crew (USA) 1-0 Leon (Mex); Charlotte FC (USA) 2-0 Monterrey (Mex); Colorado Rapids (USA) 2-2 Cruz Azul (Mex) (*Cruz Azul win 5-4 on pens*); Houston Dynamo (USA) 1-2 Pachuca (Mex); LA Galaxy (USA) 4-0 Santos Laguna (Mex); Los Angeles FC (USA) 2-1 Tigres UANL (Mex); Inter Miami (USA) 3-1 Pumas UNAM (Mex); Minnesota United (USA) 0-2 Atletico San Luis (Mex); CF Montreal (Can) 1-2 Puebla (Mex); New York City FC (USA) 1-2 Toluca (Mex); New York Red Bulls (USA) 1-1 Juarez (Mex) (*New York Red Bulls win 4-1 on pens*); Orlando City (USA) 5-1 Necaxa (Mex); Portland Timbers (USA) 1-1 Club America (Mex) (*Club America win 4-1 on pens*); Real Salt Lake (USA) 1-0 Queretaro (Mex); Seattle Sounders (USA) 2-1 Tijuana (Mex); San Diego FC (USA) 2-0 Mazatlan (Mex)

Liga MX Final Standings

	P	W	PW	PL	L	GD	Pts
Toluca*	3	2	1	0	0	+2	8
Pachuca*	3	2	0	1	0	+2	7
Tigres UANL*	3	2	0	0	1	+3	6
Puebla*	3	2	0	0	1	+2	6
Juarez	3	1	1	1	0	+3	6
Guadalajara	3	1	1	0	1	0	5
Mazatlan	3	1	1	0	1	0	5
Pumas UNAM	3	1	1	0	1	-1	5
Atletico San Luis	3	1	1	0	1	-2	5
Club America	3	0	2	1	0	0	5
Necaxa	3	1	0	1	1	-2	4
Cruz Azul	3	0	2	0	1	-7	4
Tijuana	3	1	0	0	2	-3	3
Monterrey	3	0	1	0	2	-3	2
Leon	3	0	0	1	2	-3	1
Queretaro	3	0	0	0	3	-5	0
Atlas	3	0	0	0	3	-6	0
Santos Laguna	3	0	0	0	3	-6	0

*Advance to knockout rounds

MLS Final Standings

	P	W	PW	PL	L	GD	Pts
Seattle Sounders*	3	3	0	0	0	+9	9
Inter Miami*	3	2	1	0	0	+3	8
LA Galaxy*	3	2	0	1	0	+7	7
Orlando City*	3	2	0	1	0	+6	7
Portland Timbers	3	2	0	1	0	+5	7
Columbus Crew	3	2	0	1	0	+3	7
Real Salt Lake	3	1	1	1	0	+1	6
Los Angeles FC	3	1	1	1	0	+1	6
New York Red Bulls	3	1	1	1	0	+1	6
Minnesota United	3	1	0	1	1	+1	4
FC Cincinnati	3	1	0	1	1	0	4
Colorado Rapids	3	1	0	1	1	0	4
Charlotte FC	3	1	0	1	1	-1	4
Atlanta United	3	1	0	0	2	0	3
San Diego FC	3	1	0	0	2	0	3
New York City FC	3	1	0	0	2	-2	3
CF Montreal	3	0	1	0	2	-2	2
Houston Dynamo	3	0	0	0	3	-6	0

*Advance to knockout rounds

2025 CFU CLUB SHIELD

Group A

Jul 26: Academia Quintana (Pur) 5–0 Islands Rovers (Vir); Real Rincon (Boe) 1–1 La Clery (Lca); Capoise (Hai) 0–3 (w/o) Academy Eagles (Tca)
Jul 28: Capoise (Hai) 0–3 (w/o) La Clery (Lca); Academia Quintana (Pur) 3–0 Real Rincon (Boe); Academy Eagles (Tca) 5–0 Islands Rovers (Vir)

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Academy Eagles*	2	2	0	0	8	0	6
Academia Quintana	2	2	0	0	8	0	6
La Clery	2	1	1	0	4	1	4
Real Rincon	2	0	1	1	1	4	1
Capoise	2	0	0	2	0	6	0
Islands Rovers	2	0	0	2	0	10	0

*Advance to knockout stages

Group B

Jul 26: St Paul's United (Skn) 0–2 Guyana Defence Force (Guy); Britannia (Aru) 1–1 Paradise (Grn); Moca (Dom) 1–0 Etoile Matoury (Guf)
Jul 28: Moca (Dom) 1–0 Guyana Defence Force (Guy); Britannia (Aru) 2–0 St Paul's United (Skn); Etoile Matoury (Guf) 2–4 Paradise (Grn)

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Moca*	2	2	0	0	2	0	6
Paradise	2	1	1	0	5	3	4
Britannia	2	1	1	0	3	1	4
Guyana Defence Force	2	1	0	1	2	1	3
Etoile Matoury	2	0	0	2	2	5	0
St Paul's United	2	0	0	2	0	4	0

*Advance to knockout stages

Group C

Jul 27: Transvaal (Sur) 3–0 Wolues (VGB); All Saints United (Atg) 3–1 SCSA Eagles (Sma); Police (Tri) 1–3 Weymouth Wales (Brb)
Jul 29: Police (Tri) 6-1 SCSA Eagles (Sma); Transvaal (Sur) 0-0 All Saints United (Atg); Weymouth Wales (Brb) 8-0 Wolues (VGB)

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Weymouth Wales*	2	2	0	0	11	1	6
Transvaal	2	1	1	0	3	0	4
All Saints United	2	1	1	0	3	1	4
Police	2	1	0	1	7	4	3
SCSA Eagles	2	0	0	2	2	9	0
Wolues	2	0	0	2	0	11	0

*Advance to knockout stages

Group D

Jul 27: Club Franciscain (Mtq) 6–1 Doc's United (Aia); AC Port of Spain (Tri) 2–1 Scholars International (Cay); Arnett Gardens (Jam) 4–0 CCCUL Dublanc (Dma)
Jul 29: AC Port of Spain (Tri) 4-1 Arnett Gardens (Jam); Club Franciscain (Mtq) 1-0 Scholars International (Cay); CCCUL Dublanc (Dma) 2-1 Doc's United (Aia)

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Club Franciscain*	2	2	0	0	7	1	6
AC Port of Spain	2	2	0	0	6	2	6
Arnett Gardens	2	1	0	1	5	4	3
CCCUL Dublanc	2	1	0	1	2	5	3
Scholars International	2	0	0	2	1	3	0
Doc's United	2	0	0	2	2	8	0

*Advance to knockout stages

Semi-Finals

Aug 1: Academy Eagles 0-0 Moca (*Moca win 5-4 on pens*); Weymouth Wales 2-1 Club Franciscain

Third Place Play-Off

Aug 3: Academy Eagles 0-2 Club Franciscain

Final

Aug 3: Moca 3-2 Weymouth Wales

2025 CENTRAL AMERICAN CUP

Group A

Jul 29-31: Managua (Nca) 1–4 Antigua GFC (Gua); Alajuelense (Crc) 1–2 Plaza Amador (Pan)
Aug 5-7: Antigua GFC (Gua) 0-0 Alianza (Slv); Managua (Nca) 1-2 Alajuelense (Crc)
Aug 12-13: Antigua GFC (Gua) 3-5 Plaza Amador (Pan); Alianza (Slv) 1-0 Managua (Nca)

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Plaza Amador	2	2	0	0	7	4	6
Antigua GFC	3	1	1	1	7	6	4
Alianza	2	1	1	0	1	0	4
Alajuelense	2	1	0	1	3	3	3
Managua	3	0	0	3	2	7	0

Group B

Jul 30-31: Herediano (Crc) 4–2 Real Espana (Hon); Diriangen (Nca) 1–1 Municipal (Gua)
Aug 6-7: Diriangen (Nca) 4–2 Herediano (Crc); Municipal (Gua) 1-1 Sporting San Miguelito (Pan)
Aug 13: Municipal (Gua) 2-1 Real Espana (Hon); Sporting San Miguelito (Pan) 2-1 Diriangen (Nca)

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Municipal	3	1	2	0	4	3	5
Diriangen	3	1	1	1	5	4	4
Sporting SM	2	1	1	0	2	1	4
Herediano	2	1	0	1	6	6	3
Real Espana	2	0	0	2	3	6	0

Group C

Jul 29: Verdes (Blz) 1-4 Motagua (Hon); Saprissa (Crc) 2–0 Cartagines (Crc)
Aug 5: Verdes (Blz) 1-2 Saprissa (Crc); Motagua (Hon) 2-1 Independiente (Pan)
Aug 14: Independiente (Pan) 3-1 Verdes (Blz); Motagua (Hon) 0-0 Cartagines (Crc)

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Motagua	3	2	1	0	6	2	7
Saprissa	2	2	0	0	4	1	6
Independiente	2	1	0	1	4	3	3
Cartagines	2	0	1	1	0	2	1
Verdes	3	0	0	3	3	9	0

Group D

Jul 30: Hercules (Slv) 0–2 Xelaju (Gua); Olimpia (Hon) 3–0 Real Esteli (Nca)
Aug 6: Hercules (Slv) 1-3 Olimpia (Hon); Xelaju (Gua) 3-0 Aguila (Slv)
Aug 12-14: Aguila (Slv) 2-0 Hercules (Slv); Xelaju (Gua) 4-1 Real Esteli (Nca)

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Ps
Xelaju	3	3	0	0	9	1	9
Olimpia	2	2	0	0	6	1	6
Aguila	2	1	0	1	2	3	3
Real Esteli	2	0	0	2	1	7	0
Hercules	3	0	0	3	1	7	0

Final Tables 2024-25

CAYMAN ISLANDS

	P	W	D	L	Pts
Elite (C)	20	17	1	2	52
345 FC	20	13	4	3	43
Academy	20	12	5	3	41
Savannah Tigers	20	10	7	3	37
Scholars International	20	11	3	6	36
Bodden Town	20	8	5	7	29
East End United	20	7	4	9	25
Sunset	20	7	0	13	21
Cayman Brac	20	4	1	15	13
Future* (R)	20	3	1	16	10
Roma United (R)	20	1	3	16	6

*Relegated after losing the promotion-relegation play-off to Cayman Athletic

CUBA

Apertura Group A

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
La Habana* (C)	11	7	3	1	21	12	24
Artemisa**	12	4	4	4	18	19	16
Isla de La Juventud	11	3	2	6	10	16	11
Pinar del Rio	10	2	3	5	11	13	9

*Advance to final as one of the two best group winners, and qualify for Clausura
**Enter play-ins to qualify for Clausura

Apertura Group B

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Cienfuegos*	12	6	4	2	20	11	22
Villa Clara**	12	6	4	2	16	7	22
Matanzas	12	3	3	6	10	13	12
Mayabeque	12	2	3	7	11	26	9

*Qualify for Clausura
**Enter play-ins to qualify for Clausura

Apertura Group C

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Las Tunas*	12	7	1	4	20	13	22
Ciego de Avila**	12	6	2	4	16	9	20
Camaguey	12	5	2	5	17	17	17
Sancti Spiritus	12	2	3	7	6	20	9

*Qualify for Clausura
**Enter play-ins to qualify for Clausura

Apertura Group D

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Guantanamo*	12	8	3	1	25	6	27
Santiago de Cuba**	11	4	3	4	12	11	15
Holguin	12	3	4	5	12	19	13
Granma	11	2	2	7	9	22	8

*Advance to final as one of the two best group winners, and qualify for Clausura
**Enter play-ins to qualify for Clausura

Play-Ins

Jul 5-6: Artemisa 2-3 Villa Clara; Santiago de Cuba 1-1 Ciego de Avila
Jul 9: Ciego de Avila 1-1 Santiago de Cuba (*Santiago de Cuba win 7-6 on pens*); Villa Clara 1-1 Artemisa (agg 4-3)
Santiago de Cuba & Villa Clara qualify for Clausura

Final

Jul 12: Guantanamo 0-1 La Habana

ASIA

2025-26 CHAMPIONS LEAGUE ELITE

West Region

Qualifying Play-Off

Aug 12:
Al Duhail (Qat) 3-2 Sepahan (Irn)

East Region

Qualifying Play-Off

Aug 12: Chengdu Rongcheng (Chn)
3-0 Bangkok United (Tha)

2025-26 CHAMPIONS LEAGUE TWO

West Region

Qualifying Play-Offs

Aug 13:
Goa (Ind) 2-1 Al Seeb (Oma);
Regar-TadAZ Tursunzoda (Tjk) 1-2 Ahal (Tkm)

East Region

Qualifying Play-Off

Aug 13:
Persib Bandung (Idn) 2-1 Manila Digger (Phi)

West Region Group Draw

Group A
Al Wasl (UAE), Esteghlal (Irn),
Al Muharraq (Bhr), Al Wehdat (Jor)

Group B
Al Ahli Doha (Qat), Andijon (Uzb),
Arkadag (Tkm), Al Khaldiya (Bhr)

Group C
Sepahan (Irn), Al Hussein (Jor),
Mohun Bagan (Ind), Ahal (Tkm)

Group D
Al Nassr (KSA), Al Zawraa (Irq),
Istiklol (Tjk), Goa (Ind)

East Region Group Draw

Group E
Beijing Guoan (Chn), Macarthur (Aus),
Tai Po (Hkg), Cong An Ha Noi (Vie)

Group F
Gamba Osaka (Jpn), Nam Dinh (Vie),
Ratchaburi (Tha), Eastern (Hkg)

Group G
Bangkok United (Tha), Selangor (Mas),
Lion City Sailors (Sgp), Persib Bandung (Idn)

Group H
Pohang Steelers (Kor), BG Pathum United (Tha),
Kaya–Iloilo (Phi), Tampines Rovers (Sgp)

2025-26 AFC CHALLENGE LEAGUE

West Region

Qualifying Play-Offs

Aug 12:
Abahani Dhaka (Ban) 0-2 Muras United (Kgz);
Al Karamah (Syr) 0-1 Bashundhara Kings (Ban);
Abdysh-Ata Kant (Kgz) 5-2 Hutteen (Syr);
Maziya (Mdv) 0-4 Al Arabi (Kuw);
Paro (Bhu) 1-0 Abu Muslim (Afg)

East Region

Qualifying Play-Offs

Aug 12:
Tainan City (Tpe) 4-1 Khangarid (Mng);
SP Falcons (Mng) 3-1 Taichung Futuro (Tpe);
Yangon United (Mya) 1-1 Ezra (Lao)
(*AET, Ezra win 5-3 on pens*);
Kasuka (Bru) 0-6 Phnom Penh Crown (Cam)

Final Tables 2024-25

MACAO

Regular Season

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
MUST Chao Pak Kei	9	7	2	0	39	5	23
Shao Jiang	9	7	1	1	44	6	22
Universidade	9	6	1	2	25	10	19
Cheng Fung	9	5	4	0	18	7	19
Benfica de Macau	9	5	1	3	19	14	16
Chiba	9	3	1	5	19	26	10
Gala Jia Hua	9	2	3	4	17	18	9
Hang Sai	9	2	1	6	17	26	7
Lun Lok	9	1	0	8	10	40	3
Sporting de Macau	9	0	0	9	1	57	0

• *Top five advance to championship round, bottom five enter relegation round with points obtained during regular season carried over in full*

Championship Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
MUST Chao Pak Kei (C)	17	14	2	1	78	10	44
Shao Jiang	17	14	1	2	64	13	43
Universidade	17	8	2	7	33	32	26
Benfica de Macau	17	8	1	8	31	28	25
Cheng Fung	17	5	5	7	22	42	20

Relegation Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Chiba	17	9	2	6	48	30	29
Gala Jia Hua	17	7	4	6	50	27	25
Hang Sai	17	7	2	8	53	34	23
Lun Lok (R)	17	2	0	15	15	93	6
Sporting de Macau (R)	17	1	1	15	10	95	4

MONGOLIA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Falcons (C)	27	21	4	2	104	19	67
Khangarid	27	18	3	6	66	32	57
Ulaanbaatar	27	15	6	6	65	40	51
Deren	27	15	5	7	83	30	50
Bishrelt Khoromkhon	27	11	1	15	58	89	34
Khovd Broncos	27	9	5	13	72	61	32
Hunters	27	8	5	14	38	49	29
Khaan Khuns Erchim	27	7	6	14	54	64	27
Tuv Azarganuud*	27	7	1	19	31	156	22
Brera Ilch (R)	27	4	4	19	43	74	16

**Enter promotion-relegation play-off*

Promotion-Relegation Play-Off

Aug 4: Ulaangom City 0-9 Tuv Azarganuud
Aug 8:
Tuv Azarganuud 6-0 Ulaangom City (agg 15-0)

AFRICA

Final Tables 2024-25

CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
AS Tempete MOCAF (C)	20	14	5	1	37	13	47
FC FDS	20	12	4	4	27	19	40
Olympique Real de Bangui	20	10	6	4	34	22	36
DFC du 8eme Arrondissement	20	10	5	5	26	16	35
Club Red Star de Bangui	20	8	6	6	32	21	30
Stade Centrafricain	20	7	5	8	29	25	26
Les Anges de Fatima	20	7	4	9	25	30	25
SOS Pius Njawe	20	6	5	9	28	24	23
TP USCA	20	5	7	8	25	26	22
EFC du 5eme Arrondissement	20	3	2	15	14	46	11
AS Gbangre Sport (R)	20	2	3	15	15	50	9
AS Douane (R)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

• *Updated from previous issue*

DR CONGO

Regular Season Group A

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
TP Mazembe*	22	17	2	3	45	9	53
Saint-Eloi Lupopo*	22	17	2	3	33	8	53
Sanga Balende*	22	11	4	7	24	19	37
Tanganyika*	22	12	0	10	34	25	36
Simba*	22	10	6	6	25	18	36
Don Bosco*	22	8	6	8	24	20	30
Blessing	22	7	7	8	22	27	28
Groupe Bazano	22	7	3	12	21	33	24
Malole	22	5	8	9	14	26	23
Tshinkunku	22	5	7	10	7	19	22
Lubumbashi	22	5	7	10	17	30	22
Panda B52	22	1	2	19	8	40	5

**Advance to championship round*

Regular Season Group B

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Maniema Union*	19	13	4	2	32	10	43
Aigles du Congo*	21	12	5	4	24	12	41
Rangers*	21	9	7	5	25	16	34
AS Vita Club*	21	7	8	6	25	18	29
Anges Verts*	21	7	8	6	21	21	29
Motema Pembe*	21	7	6	8	25	30	27
Celeste	21	7	5	9	19	25	26
Renaissance du Congo	21	4	9	8	18	27	21
Dauphins Noir	12	6	1	5	14	13	19
Kuya Sport	21	5	4	12	18	32	19
New JAK	21	3	6	12	16	29	15
Bukavu-Dawa	11	3	4	4	14	13	13
Etoile de Kivu	11	4	1	6	8	13	13

**Advance to championship round*

Championship Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Aigles du Congo (C)	16	11	2	3	31	14	35
Saint-Eloi Lupopo	16	10	3	3	22	7	33
Maniema Union	16	10	2	4	24	7	32
Motema Pembe	16	10	1	5	23	15	31
TP Mazembe	16	9	3	4	23	14	30
Don Bosco	16	8	3	5	22	14	27
Tanganyika	16	6	1	9	20	26	19
AS Vita Club	16	4	6	6	10	13	18
Simba	16	4	5	7	11	17	17
Rangers	16	3	6	7	20	25	15
Sanga Balende	16	0	6	10	6	23	6
Anges Verts	16	0	4	12	15	52	4

GUINEA-BISSAU

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Sport Bissau Benfica (C)	30	21	7	2	56	16	70
UDIB	30	15	8	7	43	26	53
CDR Gabu	30	13	8	9	32	22	47
SC dos Portos de Bissau	30	13	7	10	32	26	46
Os Balantas	30	13	6	11	40	37	45
Canchungo	30	12	7	11	43	38	43
Cuntum	30	10	12	8	32	22	42
Arados de Nhacra	30	10	11	9	28	29	41
Cumura	30	11	5	14	34	40	38
Hafia de Bafata	30	10	8	12	35	44	38
Sporting CGB	30	7	14	9	27	27	35
Tigre de Fronteira	30	10	5	15	32	56	35
Pelundo	30	9	7	14	30	43	34
Flamengo	30	8	9	13	25	32	33
Nuno Tristao (R)	30	8	9	13	23	30	33
Sonaco (R)	30	4	9	17	21	45	21

SUDAN

Regular Season East Zone

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Al Mirghani*	8	3	4	1	9	6	13
Al Hilal Port Sudan	8	2	6	0	7	5	12
Al Shorta Al Qadarif	8	2	3	3	8	8	9
Al Managil	8	2	3	3	8	7	9
Hay El Arab Port Sudan	8	2	2	4	8	14	8
Wad Nubawi	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

**Advance to championship round*

Regular Season Nile Zone

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Al Ahli Madani*	8	5	1	2	11	6	16
Al Amal Atbarah*	8	3	5	0	11	7	14
Al Ahli Khartoum	8	2	3	3	8	10	9
Al Falah Atbarah	8	2	3	3	7	9	9
El Ahly Shendy	8	1	2	5	2	7	5

**Advance to championship round*

Regular Season North Zone

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Hay Al Wadi*	6	3	3	0	6	3	12
Umm Maghd	6	1	5	0	5	4	8
Al Ahli Merowe	6	1	3	2	2	3	6
Al Kober Khartoum Bahri	6	1	1	4	3	6	4
Al Zoma	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Tuti	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

**Advance to championship round*

Regular Season West Zone

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
El Merreikh El Obied*	10	6	1	3	18	12	19
Al Zamala Umm Ruwaba*	10	3	6	1	14	12	15
Al Rabita	10	3	5	2	8	9	14
Al Hilal El Fasher	10	3	3	4	14	14	12
Haidoub	10	3	3	4	10	13	12
El Merreikh Nyala	10	1	4	5	10	14	7

**Advance to championship round*

Championship Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Al Hilal Omdurman (C)	7	4	2	1	15	4	14
El Merreikh	7	4	2	1	7	5	14
Al Ahli Madani	7	4	2	1	8	2	14
Al Zamala Umm Ruwaba	7	3	2	2	7	5	11
Al Amal Atbarah	7	2	2	3	7	7	8
Hay Al Wadi	7	1	4	2	5	8	7
Al Mirghani	7	1	3	3	4	9	6
El Merreikh El Obied	7	0	1	6	2	15	1

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GROUP EDITOR
Stephen Fishlock

MANAGING EDITOR
Jamie Evans

DIGITAL MANAGING EDITOR
Jared Tinslay

DESIGN
Sean Phillips, atg-media.com

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EDITORIAL
Kelsey Media, The Granary, Downs Court, Yalding Hill, Yalding, Maidstone, Kent, ME18 6AL

ADVERTISING AND SPONSORSHIP
360 Publishing: Mike Allen
Tel. 07917 588511
Email: mike@360publishing.co.uk

AD PRODUCTION MANAGER
Talk Media Ltd: Nick Bond
Tel. 01732 445325
Email: nick@talk-media.uk

PUBLISHER Steve Brown
MANAGING DIRECTOR OF CONSUMER ADVERTISING Oswin Grady
OPERATIONS DIRECTOR Gill Lambert
PRINT PRODUCTION MANAGER
Georgina Harris
PRINT PRODUCTION CONTROLLERS
Hayley Brown & Kelly Orriss

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Great Britain: Seymour Distribution Ltd
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CONTACT US
Editorial: wos.ed@kelsey.co.uk
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